

## DOCTRINE OF FOOLS AND FOLLY

### I. Introduction.

- A. As with any subject, the subject of fools and folly should be approached from a scriptural standpoint, which is designed to give the believer the same perspective that God has on this subject.
- B. It should be evident that much of what passes for wisdom in this world is labeled by the Bible as foolishness; further many wise people in the cosmic estimation are fools from the biblical estimation. ICor. 1:20-21
- C. However, the believer should be aware of the fact that God allows fools to exist since they cannot deter His plan (IICor. 13:8), and they serve as negative examples for those that wish to be wise.
- D. Many people have commented on the nature of fools and folly, some of which include:
  1. *"It is better to be a fool than to be dead."* -- Robert Louis Stevenson
  2. *"A fool must now and then be right by chance."* -- William Cowper
  3. *"The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly, is to fill the world with fools."* -- Herbert Spencer
  4. *"However big the fool, there is always a bigger fool to admire him."* -- Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux
  5. *"A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees."* -- William Blake
- E. While these statements may be true, they offer no real incentive or method for avoiding the ways of fools and folly.
- F. The Bible makes it plain that the only method for avoiding the way of the fool is to fear God, absorb the truths of doctrine, and apply them to your experience. Prov. 1:7; Ps. 111:10; Eccles. 12:13
- G. The Bible clearly identifies the fool, and we should not be fearful of recognizing his nature, identifying him, and speaking the truth about fools and folly.
  1. Some believers misunderstand Jesus' command about calling a person a fool, since they do not recognize that He was speaking about judging out of anger, or some other inappropriate form of sinful judging. Matt. 5:22
  2. If He meant that one should never identify a fool or his folly, He did not comply with His own teaching. Matt. 23:17

### II. Vocabulary.

#### A. Hebrew vocabulary.

1. נָבַל (nabhal), verb, 5X, to be senseless or foolish; it can shade into treating one with disgust, contempt, or scorn.
  - a. נָבָל (nabhal), m.noun, proper name, foolish; emphasizes being ignoble, disgraceful, and boorish; lacking in sensibility toward God, as well as lacking in moral sensibility. ISam. 25:25
  - b. נְבִלָה (n<sup>e</sup>bhalah), f.noun, 13X, folly, the quality that disregards moral and spiritual claims, emphasizes senselessness, villainy, disgrace, immorality, and the type of activity that should be stigmatized.
  - c. נְבִלּוּת (nabhluth), f.noun, 1X, folly, immodesty, shamelessness. Hos. 2:10

2. תָּפֵל (taphel), m.adj. 2X, the verbal root means to be unsavory, to be tasteless; folly, foolishness, not mental weakness, sinful folly. Job 6:6; Lam. 2:14
    - a. תִּפְלָה (tiphlah), f.noun, 3X, folly, foolishness. Job 1:22, 24:12; Jer. 23:13
  3. סָכַל (sakhal), verb, 8X, it is distinguished from the verb for being wise; demonstrating a lack of moral or spiritual sense; it is mostly used in contexts of men acting out of fear, not trusting God, and behaving rashly.
    - a. סָכָל (sakhal), m.noun, 8X, a fool.
    - b. סֶכֶל (sekhel), m.noun, 1X, folly, foolishness. Eccles. 10:6
    - c. סִכְלוּת (sikhloth), f.noun, 7X, folly, foolishness, characterizes the man with twisted or distorted values.
  4. כָּסַל (kasal), verb, 1X, to be stupid or foolish. Jer. 10:8
    - a. כִּסְלָה (kislah), f.noun, 1X, folly, foolishness.
    - b. כְּסִיל (k<sup>e</sup>siyl), m.noun, fool, dullard, dull, obstinate; it does not refer to mental deficiency, but to a propensity to make wrong choices.
    - c. כְּסִילוּת (k<sup>e</sup>siyluth), f.noun, 1X, folly, stupidity. Prov. 9:13
  5. אָוִיל (°<sup>e</sup>wiyl), m.noun, from an unidentified root, 26X, a fool, primarily refers to moral perversion or insolence, to what is sinful rather than mental stupidity.
    - a. אָוִילי (°<sup>e</sup>wiliy), adj. 1X, foolish.
    - b. אָוִילת (°iwweleth), f.noun, 25X, folly, foolishness; often associated with כְּסִיל (k<sup>e</sup>siyl—4b above), and probably has some overlap in meaning.
- B. Greek vocabulary.
1. μωραίνω (moraino), verb, 4X, to make foolish, to demonstrate something to be foolish.
    - a. μωρός (moros), adjective, 12X, foolish, stupid, always used as a term of reproach; used of people that are mentally weak, irrational, or lacking in foresight. Matt. 7:26
    - b. μωρία (moria), f.noun, 5X, foolish, irrational, nonsense.
  2. ἀφροσύνη (aphrosune), f.noun, 4X, the state of one that lacks prudence or good judgment, foolishness, lack of sense.
    - a. ἀφρων (aphron), 11X, describes one that does not use good judgment, one that lacks in common sense, foolish.
  3. ἀνόητος (anoetos), adjective, 6X, without understanding, foolish; opposite of σοφός (sophos--the wise man).
    - a. ἀνοία (anoia), f.noun, 2X, folly, foolishness, madness, the quality of being without understanding, often displays itself with irrational anger or rage. Lk. 6:11
  4. ἀσύνετος (asunetos), adjective, 5X, one that lacks inner organization and understanding; it also implies a lack of moral quality.

### III. Definition and description.

- A. While there may well be an element of intellectual lack that characterizes a fool and his folly, the Bible makes it clear that there is a relationship between this lack of understanding and the spiritual and moral problems that exist in the fool.
- B. It should be observed that all people act foolishly at one time or another; we must make a distinction between the occasional foolish act and the habitually foolish person Lk. 24:25; Matt. 23:17

- C. However, one should be aware that engaging in foolish actions makes it easier to engage in that action again; if one continues to engage in folly, he runs the risk of becoming a habitual fool.
- D. Webster describes the fool as one that is destitute of reason, lacking the common powers of understanding, and an idiot (which should be viewed as the extreme example).
- E. He goes on to describe the fool as a person deficient in intellect, one who acts absurdly, one who pursues a course contrary to the dictates of wisdom, one who is not prudent, and one without good judgment.
- F. He recognizes the moral and spiritual issues involved in being a fool as he identifies the fool as one who acts contrary to moral and religious wisdom; there is often an implied (or explicit) element of wickedness present in fools.
- G. Folly is defined as a simple act or instance of foolishness; however, in the ongoing basis, folly is defined as a lack of good sense, normal prudence, or the requisite foresight.
- H. There is a moral element to folly, which has largely been eliminated from our modern dictionaries.
- I. It was also defined as a criminally or tragically foolish action or conduct, which may have a nuance of evil, wickedness, or lewd behavior. Prov. 24:9
- J. As we will see, it is one thing to be naïve and lack understanding; however, the fool is one that is a fool by choice, he is one that has made choices to reject the path of wisdom.

#### IV. A fool and his relationship to God.

- A. The first thing that one must understand with respect to foolish activity is that all unbelievers (including those that are positive) act foolishly because they do not recognize God, His plan, or His wisdom. Tit. 3:3
- B. The habitual fool denies the existence of God since he has rejected the internal witness to God's existence as well as the external witness of creation. Ps. 14:1; Eccles. 3:1; Rom. 1:18-20
- C. While some fools deny God's existence, some fools recognize His existence; however, both groups may reject His grace, and treat Him with disdain. Ps. 74:18,22
- D. Although God has made every provision for the human race to receive and enjoy His plan, fools reject the Divine revelation and opt for their own self-chosen course in life. Prov. 1:7,22,29, 12:15
- E. Jesus indicated that rejection of the gospel was as foolish as building a house on a foundation that would not support it permanently. Matt. 7:24-27
- F. Once a person has rejected God's wisdom, he may well manifest it by rejecting the advice of those that represent God and His wisdom. Prov. 1:24-25,30; Lk. 10:16
- G. God has provided authorities in His plan for the express purpose of instructing those that desire to acclimate to Him; however, those that reject that provision will likely suffer for their folly.
  - 1. Parental authority is the primary authority established for teaching children Bible doctrine. Prov. 4:1-5, 6:20, 15:20; Eph. 6:4
  - 2. The pastor-teacher is provided his authority in order to instruct believers in the issues of the faith. IICor. 10:8, 13:10; Tit. 2:15
  - 3. The fool may very well disregard the Establishment Chain of Command, but he will suffer the consequences for his folly. Rom. 13:1-2; IPet. 2:13-15
- H. Fools do not take the righteous nature of God seriously enough; therefore, they tend to be dismissive of their own sin and guilt. Prov. 14:9

I. Further, it is clear that the fool is not neutral with respect to God, he finds God to be the source of at least some of his vexation. Prov. 19:3

V. The character of a fool.

A. One aspect of folly is that of being naïve or inexperienced, which is not necessarily sinful in itself; however, when a person consistently rejects the overtures of wisdom, he becomes culpable for his lack of understanding. Prov. 1:22

1. The Hebrew noun פְּתִי (pethiy—naïve, simple), refers to one that is immature and/or inexperienced; this type of person is open to all forms of enticements since he has not developed the ability to discern and discriminate between right and wrong. Prov. 7:7

a. The simple person is quite gullible and subject to deception. Prov. 14:15-16

b. The simple person does not consider the dangers involved in unwise courses of action; therefore, they will suffer for their lack of discretion.. Prov. 22:3, 27:12

c. Discipline upon the disobedient may have the helpful effect of instructing the naïve. Prov. 19:25, 21:11

d. However, the naïve person may well be deceived and simply suffer the effects of his own stupidity. Prov. 14:18

2. Bible doctrine (wisdom) is offered to the naïve in order to give them the necessary frame of reference to make discriminating decisions. Prov. 1:4

3. Both wisdom and folly are personified as women that attempt to persuade men and urge them to follow in their respective paths. Prov. 8:1-5, 9:1-4, 13-16

4. However, if the naïve, undiscerning person continues with the simplistic lifestyle and does not employ due diligence, he will eventually pay the price. Prov. 1:32

B. Although he lacks wisdom, the fool is confident in his own sufficiency; in his arrogance, he is filled with self-deception. Prov. 12:15, 14:16, 28:26; Eccles. 2:14; Rom. 1:22

C. His inappropriate and misplaced confidence in himself causes the fool to think that he knows it all; thus, he fails to listen and quickly rushes to judgment. Prov. 18:13

D. While he may seek to convince you he is interested in the truth, he is not (Prov. 17:7,16, 24:7); he is characterized by foolishness and deceit. Prov. 14:8,24, 15:14

E. Due to a rejection of authority, lack of knowledge, experience, and wisdom, fools lose the ability to think clearly, logically, and rationally. Matt. 23:16-19

1. This may not happen immediately or totally; the extent of the loss would be proportional to the extent that they continue to engage in folly.

2. The ability to think clearly is reversible to the extent that the fool is willing to change his mind and orient to reality.

F. The fool refuses to exercise self-control with regard to his temper; when you are dealing with a hot head, you are dealing with a fool. Prov. 12:16, 29:11; Eccles. 7:9

G. He is characterized by laziness, which will ultimately result in great difficulty for the fool. Eccles. 4:5; Prov. 6:6-11, 17:24

H. Given the complacent nature of the fool, it should not be surprising that fools tend to associate with those things and people that are not only outside the directive will of God, but are very often dangerous in themselves.

1. Criminal types. Prov. 2:11-15

2. The adulteress. Prov. 2:16-19, 6:23-29

3. Immoral women in general. Prov. 29:3

4. Other fools. Prov. 13:20

5. Gluttons. Prov. 28:7

- I. Just as a wise man delights in the pursuit of wisdom, even so the fool delights in engaging in wicked plans and schemes as he seeks to advance his agenda. Prov. 10:23
- J. Fools may become so enamored with evil that it becomes an odious thing for them to even consider departing from it; separation is not much of an issue for the fool. Prov. 10:23, 13:19
- K. In his arrogance and self-deception, he engages in a lot of unprofitable speech, which starts badly enough and then often deteriorates to wickedness. Prov. 12:23, 15:2, 29:20; Eccles. 5:3, 10:12-14
  - 1. Lying. Prov. 10:18
  - 2. Slander. Prov. 10:18
  - 3. Constant arguing. Prov. 20:3
  - 4. His angry disposition simply generates strife. Prov. 14:17,29; Eccles. 7:9; Prov. 18:6
  - 5. Meddling in affairs that do not pertain to him. Prov. 26:17
  - 6. Foolish speech in general, which not only proceeds from him, but on which he thrives. Prov. 15:2,14
  - 7. The fool is the type of person that believes that because he thinks something, it is right; therefore, he loves to share his mind on all matters. Prov. 18:2
  - 8. Although fools babble on and on, the wise man is instructed to discern the folly of the fool and avoid it. Prov. 10:8,10; IITim. 6:20; IITim. 2:23; Tit. 3:9
  - 9. Occasionally, even the fool recognizes that saying something would remove any doubt about his status, so he remains quiet. Prov. 17:28
- L. In that regard, the wise person simply has to observe a fool and it will become apparent that he is observing a fool. Prov. 13:16; Eccles. 10:3
- M. Given the fact that the fool is referred to in many contexts with other categories of persons, it should not be surprising to find that he has a lot in common with the sluggard, the scoffer, and other undesirable types. Prov. 1:22, 19:1

## VI. Results of fools and their folly.

- A. As alluded to in several points above, those that opt to reject wisdom, remain ignorant, and make foolish choices will pay the price.
- B. The fool is often stupid enough to continue in his foolishness, and destines himself to keep making the same bad choices. Prov. 26:11, 27:22
- C. Although the foolish may be deluded into believing that they have established themselves and are immune to judgment, wisdom indicates otherwise. Job 5:3; Ps. 49:11-13
- D. Wisdom literature would suggest that the wise will eventually be promoted, while the fool will be his servant in forced labor. Prov. 11:29
- E. In that regard, there is a certain amount of suffering that the fool brings upon himself by virtue of his foolish activity. Prov. 10:13, 18:6, 19:29, 26:3
  - 1. The discipline may be inflicted by an outside agent, by God Himself, or the fool may suffer physical maladies on account of his foolish lifestyle. Job 5:2; Prov. 7:22
  - 2. The naïve person, who chooses ignorance over discernment will find that his stupidity will be his undoing. Prov. 1:32
  - 3. The fool that engages in a lot of unprofitable, ungodly, and evil verbal activity will find that his tongue will finally be his ruin. Prov. 10:14, 13:3, 18:7; Eccles. 10:2
- F. Since raising a fool is viewed as a shame for adjusted parents, the Bible advises parents to deal with the folly of youth early and often. Prov. 10:1, 15:20, 17:21,25, 19:13
- G. The fool does not carefully consider the value of hard work, budgeting, or planning for the future; therefore, he will eventually find himself in fiscal distress. Prov. 21:20

- H. The fool will demonstrate his folly by leaving the paths of wisdom, and parting company with the wise, who could actually help the fool if he was willing. Eccles. 10:2
- I. There is also the very good chance that the fool will continue to return to the same sort of foolish behavior in which he has engaged in the past. Prov. 26:11
- J. The foolish woman does not adhere to the godliness code for the diligent wife, mother, homemaker niche, and so ends up damaging her own household. Prov. 14:1

VII. Dealing with fools.

- A. Parents are exhorted to recognize that there is a certain amount of foolishness within every child that can only be removed via corporal discipline. Prov. 22:15, 13:24, 23:14
  - 1. All parents can only seek to enforce the principles and precepts of doctrine on the child while he is under the authority of the parents.
  - 2. The parents are not ultimately responsible if the foolish child rejects the truth and pursues a foolish lifestyle. Prov. 15:5
  - 3. You may be quite diligent to provide the appropriate verbal and corporal correction, but a fool may not respond. Prov. 17:10
- B. Generally speaking, the best approach for the wise man is to seek to avoid the fool or any dealings with him. Prov. 13:20; 17:12
  - 1. The fool's lack of discipline and understanding renders him incapable of providing direction for himself or anyone else. Prov. 10:21, 26:7,9
  - 2. An ongoing association with a fool will drag one down to the level of the fool with whom he associates, and have an adverse impact on him. Prov. 14:7
  - 3. In fact, hard labor is more to be desired than dealing with a fool when he is provoked. Prov. 27:3
  - 4. It is clearly not wise to employ a fool, since any endeavor in which the fool is involved has the very good chance of failure. Prov. 26:6,10
- C. However, avoiding fools is not entirely possible in this life, given the propensity of the human race to reject the Divine viewpoint.
- D. When one encounters a fool, he must call upon the wisdom he possesses and seek to make the proper application toward the fool.
- E. In some cases, the proper application is to rebuke the fool for his stupidity in order to attack his misplaced confidence in himself. Prov. 26:5
- F. In other cases, it is best to refrain from any dialogue with the fool in order to avoid being dragged down to the fool's level. Prov. 26:4
- G. When a wise man has an issue with a fool, there is no possibility of settling the matter in a calm way, no matter what the mood of a fool may be. Prov. 29:9
- H. Therefore, one should minimize the situation and move on; there is a time and place for the wise man not to share his wisdom with the fool since the fool will not appreciate the wisdom and will reject it. Prov. 23:9; Matt. 7:6
- I. It is never appropriate to exalt a foolish man or give him any sort of recognition since that would simply confirm him in his stupidity. Prov. 26:1
- J. If a wise man attempts to help a fool given to anger, he will likely not meet success and be forced to do it again. Prov. 19:19