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How to Recognize a Fool

Skillful Living

Proverbs 18:1-24

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Two weeks ago we learned from the writer of Proverbs that he would rather encounter on the path of life a she-bear separated from her cubs than a fool in his folly. It's pretty graphic imagery, but it does raise a question: Then how do you recognize a fool? Well that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 18. This week and next week will be it for Proverbs this summer. In chapter 18 I've just kind of cherry-picked what I would consider seven marks of a fool. The first one is in verse 1:

> **He who separates himself seeks *his own* desire,**
> **He quarrels against all sound wisdom.** (*NASB, Proverbs 18:1)

The first one is *self-absorption.* Literally, what the Hebrew says is he who **separates himself** seeks self-absorption, seeks kind of this self-gratification. It's someone whose motto in life is: "What's in it for me?" There is no real thought to the community, no real thought of others. Everything is run through the grid: "What's in it for me?" This person separates himself or herself as this selfish, self-absorbed individual.

The second part of that verse—**He quarrels against all sound wisdom**—so **against sound wisdom** is the possibility of something different than understanding the way God intended life to be—that there's a better way to live. This idea of **quarrels against**—the Hebrew is literally *bares his teeth*—is an imagery of someone who doesn't just disagree but reacts violently. It's kind of an image of a wolf over a kill and maybe another prey animal comes along and the wolf bares its teeth to push the other prey animal away. That's the imagery; it's kind of a violent reaction to anyone who suggests that this person should live otherwise. I do think it's difficult for us who live every day in this selfish, self-absorbed, consumerist culture to really come to grips with how destructive this behavior is. We've talked about it numerous times in Proverbs; it's a theme that comes up again and again and again. But if that's all you've ever known, it just seems normal. There are people in the room who are of advanced ages, who remember a time when life was different—where there was much more a sense of community, a sense that we are in this together, a sense that we need each other if we are going to survive and flourish. But there are others in the room who have never known that. All you have ever known is this selfish, self-absorbed culture of individualism—and there is a tendency to think that's normal. While it may be normal, it's not good. As a matter of fact, there are warnings after warnings after warnings in Proverbs that this will destroy us, and to understand that and create a new grid to see this selfish, self-absorbed individualism for what it is. There's nothing wrong with being an individual in the sense of being your own unique you, as God has made you. That's different than what we might call individualism. That's more of kind of an ideology; it's a philosophy; it's a way of life that is hurtful and destructive to both yourself and the community. All the way back in the 1830's the French statesman Tocqueville showed up in America and wrote what is quite a famous writing about his experience in America. Most of what he said was positive. He delighted in what he saw in democracy and what he saw in advancements and changes in America. Generally speaking it was a very glowing report. But interestingly enough, all the way back in the 1830's, he had one real warning, one big concern. He identified what he thought was a rampant

individualism that, if it didn't change, would ultimately destroy us. Now think: that was all the way back in the 1830's and think about how much has changed to America, 2017. So the first mark of a fool is this self-absorption where the motto is: "What's in it for me?" The second one is in verse 2:

A fool does not delight in understanding,
But only in revealing his own mind [or his own opinion]**.**

I'm going to use the description of the fool today that is provided by Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner for verse 2. Verse 2 could be summarized as: *Open mouth, Closed mind*. The idea again is understanding God's vision for the world, understanding the world as God intended it to be. But the fool isn't interested in that, doesn't want to hear it. The fool has a closed mind—what Proverbs refers to as the "know it all" fool who simply wants to open his or her mouth and state his or her opinion over and over again. You have kind of a similar proverb in verse 13:

He who gives an answer before he hears,
It is folly and shame to him.

Again, this is someone who is *giving the answer before he even hears the question*. Not interested in learning, not interested in the possibility he or she may be wrong or need correction, but he simply opens his or her mouth and wants to state his opinion over and over again. Several years ago, as a matter of fact, all the way back when I was in grad school—so I'm in my early 30's—and in one of my classes they had a panel of college students. So I'm a Baby Boomer; these were basically Gen X-ers, and it was this panel discussion with a little Q & A. At one point in the discussion, one of these college students pointed right at us—and I think was pointing right at me—and said, "The problem with you Baby Boomers is you keep giving answers and you don't even understand our questions!" Well I've never forgotten that. I think that was a fair indictment; I also think it's true of every generation. There is a tendency to have a closed mind and open mouth. We think we know it all; we have all the answers and we're not listening to the questions. That is a mark of a fool.

We remind ourselves that James says we need to be "quick to hear, slow to speak." Two ears...one mouth...that should tell us something *(laughter)*. I also want to throw this in for no extra charge: *(laughter)*. There is such a thing as *foolish parenting* that comes right out of this proverb. Too many parents, especially parents of adolescents, are busy giving answers and they're not listening to the questions. We as parents immediately shift into lecture mode, often without even understanding what's going on. I encourage parents, especially parents of teenagers: always ask ten questions before you go into lecture mode. You might be surprised how many times you figure out the lecture's not necessary. To understand the questions is the first step in skillful parenting. So mark number 2: *Closed mind, Open mouth*.

Now verses 3, 6, and 7 aren't marks of a fool, but I want to comment on them. Verse 3:

When a wicked man comes, contempt also comes,
And with dishonor *comes* scorn.

What verse 3 is saying is: this is the response of the community. I've mentioned many times that to understand the Book of Proverbs you have to understand it's talking about life in the community. I talked several weeks ago from the book, *Tribe*, how ancient cultures and tribes took this selfish individualism seriously, because that self-absorption, "What's in it for me?" attitude was so

devastating to the tribe. Often that behavior was met with the most serious of punishments. What the proverb is saying is that person is met with contempt, shame and scorn because the behavior is not only destructive to that person, but destructive to the community. So much so, verse 6:

A fool's lips bring strife, [*create conflict* in others words]
And his mouth calls for blows.

Now this is hyperbole, but what the proverb is saying is the behavior of the fool is so destructive, he needs to be punched in the mouth. Now again, this is hyperbole, I'm not advocating such behavior. I might advocate some duct tape, which at times is helpful (*laughter*), but the proverb is making a very exaggerated statement to say, "This is so bad. Somebody in the community needs to punch the fool in the mouth and stop him." Verse 7:

A fool's mouth is his ruin,
And his lips are the snare of his soul.

In other words, what the proverb is saying is, "If you will punch him in the mouth and stop him, you are actually doing him a favor." If someone doesn't stop him, his mouth is going to get him in trouble; it's the very snare or trap of his soul. Now basically what those proverbs are saying is that when a community is healthy, it identifies the fool. There should be contempt and shame; there should be a response in such a way that it stops the fool before the fool destroys the community. But here's the question: what happens when the culture no longer responds with contempt, no longer responds with shame, no longer thinks this person should be stopped, but actually celebrates such behavior, gives such people television shows, makes them celebrities and actually rejoices and promotes such destructive behavior?

This summer I've been re-reading Chuck Colson's book, *Against the Night*. If you've never read it, it is a tremendous book. I think now you have to find it on the used-book market, but it was published in 1989. A read through that book makes it seem like Colson was a modern-day prophet, perfectly fulfilling where the culture is going. In that book he describes that throughout history cultures have had various communities and groups, things within the community that provided, basically, a firewall against the fools among us. Every culture is always going to have fools, but there are things in place within a healthy culture that provide a firewall to keep fools contained to minimize the damage. But he raises the question: What happens when the firewalls are gone? This was his prediction of what's happened to us as a culture. We're no longer offended; we no longer scorn bad behavior; we no longer identify it is as destructive. We cheerlead it; we applaud it; we promote it, and his prediction was, "This will ultimately consume us and destroy us as a culture."

The third identifying mark is in verse 9:

He also who is slack in his work
Is brother to him who destroys.

Third mark of a fool is a fool is *lazy and unproductive.* This is again one of those topics that is discussed again and again and again in the Book of Proverbs—the damage one does to the community when one is lazy and unproductive—often referring to that person in Proverbs as the *sluggard*. It seems to me we have a growing problem with this in our culture. We have lost the value of work. We have failed to realize work is good and it's right and it's noble. It fills life with meaning and purpose. It is each of us making our contribution to the flourishing of the community.

It's a part of what gives life meaning. Work is not punishment; work is not something we have to try to get out of or do as little as possible. It's noble and it's right and it's filled with meaning and purpose. Before there was ever sin in the world, there was work. We work because we are made in the image of God and God works. In the new heaven and the new earth there will be work because work is noble and it's meaningful and it gives purpose to life. We as a culture have lost that sense of the value of work. There are many who have become lazy and unproductive. What the proverb is saying is that the lazy person is a brother to the pillager. In the second part of the proverb, **to him who destroys,** literally the Hebrew is the pillager, the one who goes into the village and robs and steals and pillages from others. Others work hard; they accumulate. The pillager goes in and steals it, and he says the person who is lazy and unproductive is *a brother to the pillager*. He or she is doing the exact same thing. Other people are productive; they are making the community work, but the lazy and unproductive steal from them. They take what doesn't belong to them; they are working the system. They are no different than the pillager. We as a culture have moved to such a degree that we actually enable bad behavior; we promote bad behavior. We do this under the umbrella of compassion, but it's not compassionate at all. People lose their sense of meaning and purpose; they lose their sense of dignity. They lose what it means to be made in the image of God. It's not compassionate; we are actually destroying these people when we enable them to continue in bad behavior. There will always be those among us that, for various reasons, legitimately can't work and it's our job to make sure they are well cared for. But for those who are physically and emotionally able to carry their load, they should be expected to do their part.

This was a problem in the Roman Empire. It was a problem in the Thessalonian community. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians, this was a problem and he stated it clearly: "If they will not work, don't let them eat." You say, "Well that's rather harsh!" but it's actually trying to wake them up. The proverb says the hungry belly is a good motivator: "Get to work; do your part." Again, Paul said, "If they don't work, don't let them eat. Don't enable behavior that is ultimately destructive to them and the community." So mark number three as *lazy and unproductive*.

Mark number four is found in verses 10 and 11. I want to start with verse 11 because it is the mark of the fool:

> **A rich man's wealth is his strong city,**
> **And like a high wall in his own imagination.**

The fool *trusts the things of this world for safety and security*. That's what verse 11 just said. Wealth in the ancient world was both money, as we would think of it, but also stuff. Someone who trusts in the things of this world for safety and security is a fool. These are not people characterized by peace, a calm spirit, and a sense of calm. They are characterized by a sense of fear and anxiety, restlessness and being driven because enough is never enough, and how much do you have to have and what about the economy and what about the stock market and my trust is put in something that has so many things out of my control that can affect it. That is a life of misery; it's a life of worry; it's a life of fear. Enough will never be enough. The Bible talks a lot about how foolish it is to put your trust in money and stuff. It's not that there is anything wrong with wealth. It's that when that becomes my strong tower, when that becomes by place of refuge, when that's what I trust in, I'm never going to know peace and how foolish to trust in something so ineffective and temporary as money and stuff. The writer of Psalm 49 talks a lot about the foolishness of trusting riches. At one point in the psalm he actually gets kind of sarcastic and he says, "These people who trust in riches must believe that their stuff will last forever," because how else could you explain why some would take something as precious as life and invest their life in something that ultimately won't last. Why

else would you do that? You must think it's going to last forever. It's kind of a sarcastic way of making a point. Jesus talked about the danger of building your house on the sand. It's just not going to last. It's, I think, helpful to remind ourselves in a culture that idolizes money and stuff that, at the end of the day, when you are talking about the things that ultimately matter, there's very little money can do. Money pays the bills. Money cannot restore a marriage; money cannot bring home a rebellious teenager; money cannot make this sickness in your child go away; money does not cause us to avoid tragedy; money does not make the cancer go away; money does not stop the addiction. At the end of the day, money does not save your soul. There's very little in terms of what really matters that money can accomplish. So what is the alternative? Well its verse 10:

> **The name of the Lord is a strong tower;**
> **The righteous** [the tzadik] **runs into it and is safe.**

In the ancient world most significant cities had walls around them for protection, but many of them, within the walls, had a high tower that was a place of refuge and safety. So the people could go about their lives and, if things got difficult, if they were under attack, they could flee within the walls. But if it looked like the walls were going to be breeched, they could run into the strong tower and know that they would be safe. So it was an imagery of a place of safety, a place of calm, a place of security, a place I can go and know that even in the worst moments of life, everything's going to be okay. What provides that for the righteous? It's the name of the Lord, which is a way of saying *All that God is*—for us to understand that in the new covenant in Christ I find my safely; I find my security; I find my identity; I find my place of refuge. I understand what makes me significant, what gives me peace and safety and security and value is not in jeopardy every day based on the stock market, based on the economy, based on my job, based on life circumstances, but rather it's based on who I am in Christ. Because it has been provided to me on the basis of God's grace, not on the basis of my performance, I know that even on my worst days I have a place of refuge where I can go and I am safe and I am secure and I am at peace and I am at rest. My security, my safety, my value, my significance—they are not in jeopardy; they don't go up and down. Therefore I know, no matter what the world throws at me, no matter how difficult it gets, I have a place of refuge where I can be safe and be at peace. The skilled person, the *tzadik*, the righteous, knows that that's true. *The fool trusts the things of this world*. It is a mark of the foolish.

The fifth mark is in verse 12:

> **Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty,**
> **But humility *goes* before honor.**

The word haughty means *to think highly*. Basically it's the idea that I think more highly of myself than someone else. It's all based on comparison—that compared to someone else, I think of myself as better. Now the only reason I even need to have that conversation with myself is because of my own insecurities, my own desperate need to be somebody. So I'm trying to find somebody that I can compare to, in my mind favorably to, in order to believe I have some value and significance. That's the idea there. If you've never read C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*, it's worth a read. There's a great chapter on pride. It's called *The Great Sin*. Lewis would say that it is the ultimate sin, and all other sins flow out of that. I would suggest the New Testament agrees. It *is* the ultimate sin from which all other sins flow. It's a great chapter; here's part of what he says: "There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. The more we have it in ourselves the more we dislike it in others. Now what you want to get clear is that pride is essentially competitive by its very nature. Pride gets no pleasure out of

having something, only out of having something more than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich or clever or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer or more clever or better looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, clever or good looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud, the pleasure of being above the rest."

The fool is characterized by arrogance. I concluded years ago that if you truly understand the message of grace there is virtually no way you can be arrogant. If all that you have has been provided as a gift of God's grace, it's not on the basis of your performance or your merit or anything else, it's purely a gift of God's grace, then you have virtually nothing to be arrogant about. You didn't do anything! Therefore arrogance would always be evidence you still don't really understand the message of grace. The fool is identified by arrogance, by this haughty spirit.

The sixth mark is in verse 14:

> **The spirit of a man can endure his sickness,** [or affliction]**,**
> **But *as for* a broken spirit who can bear it?**

The idea of **the spirit of a man** is talking about life as God intended it to be—a life of happiness, a life of joy, a life of peace, a life of contentment, a life that is full of life. And what the proverb is saying is the righteous who understand the truth and travel God's path, understand that that life is available even in times of affliction. It's a reminder again that our joy, our happiness, our peace, our contentment is not relevant to our circumstances; it's relevant to who we are in Christ. It's relevant to our understanding that we have a strong tower; we have a place of refuge! No matter what happens in this world, everything's going to be okay. The hope of the gospel is that one day the best is yet to come and no matter what happens in this world, God is going to be there, He's going to take care of me and everything's going to be okay. Therefore, in the good times I experience life but even in times of adversity I understand everything's still going to be okay. It's the apostle Paul writing from prison saying, *"I've learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself*."

The fool collapses in adversity. The mark would be *the fool simply can't endure affliction*. The idea's basically this—we learned this several weeks ago—there is a way that seems right to a man, but the end is misery. When people travel their own path they're not happy; they're not satisfied; they're not fulfilled; they're not full of life; they're rather miserable. But if you're miserable when your circumstances are relatively good, you have no chance of surviving when you experience adversity. If you can't find the joy of life in the good times, you are absolutely going to collapse in the bad times. The mark of a fool—what kind of exposes a fool—is a fool basically collapses when times get hard. The last mark is in verses 18 and 19:

> **The cast lot puts an end to strife**
> **And decides between the mighty ones.**
> **A brother offended *is harder to be won* than a strong city,**
> **And contentions are like the bars of a citadel.**

The idea of a **cast lot** is kind of the Old Testament way of saying *surrender to the will of God*. There's a lot of scholarly discussion about what exactly the cast lots were in the Old Testament. Nobody is quite sure. But the point is, it was a way to determine the will of God. So what you have in verse 18 are two **mighty ones,** so two players who now are locked up in some level of conflict. Those that are numbered among the righteous, those who understand the value of the community,

those who understand the big picture of life as God intended it to be, will surrender to the will of God. They understand, at the end of the day, the reputation and glory of God are more important than what I want, and therefore it's not always about justice; it's not always about fairness. Sometimes it's even a willingness to disadvantage myself to get the situation settled for the sake of the reputation of God. Those that are among the righteous figured out they surrender, they get it done in order to continue to move forward. *The fool is someone who has to win*. The fool's motto is "What's in it for me?" The fool is always selfish and self-absorbed and so the fool always has to win. Whether it's an argument at home, whether it's an argument with your kids or your spouse, whether it's a conflict in business, whether it's something in the neighborhood, the fool has to win. The fool has to view himself or herself as better than others. Therefore I can't lose; I have to win. It's kind of this driving motto in life. So even when it means the destruction of a relationship, the destruction of a business partnership or someone next door, I have to win. We've all seen this over the years. You see it in business, in neighborhoods, in families; you see it in churches. People can dress up their argument in all kinds of spiritual language but, at the end of the day, I have to win and I will do whatever is necessary to win. In the process, you have so devastated and fractured the relationship that it's likely never to be healed again, and you have done unimaginable damage to the reputation of Christ.

Verse 19 is essentially saying when you do that and you so deeply offend and hurt someone, it's harder to win that person back than a *fortified city*. Now they have bars on their heart like bars in a jail, and the likelihood that you're ever really going to restore the relationship is very, very unlikely. The mark of a fool is a fool always has to win. The mark of someone living skillfully is to understand there is something bigger at stake. There is something more valuable at work here, and at times I need to choose to surrender to the will of God for the sake of the reputation of Christ, and I'll even disadvantage myself if necessary in order to resolve this and move on.

Seven marks of a fool—there are two ways to process this. One is: none of us wants to be the fool. So if you find an identifying mark, identifying you, then it's like: *"What do I need to do to change this? I don't want to be the fool!"* But the second is: when we encounter the fool on the path of life, how do we respond? We respond *skillfully*! If you find a she-bear on the path that's been separated from her cubs, you don't go up and throw a dirt clod at her. You've got to be more skillful than that. We've repeated this quite a bit this summer. You need to learn to respond skillfully in order that you don't get sucked into the folly and contribute to the breakdown of the community, but rather you use the skill to respond in such a way that you're able to at least create pockets of flourishing—to give people a taste of the world as God intended it to be—in order to create platforms from which we can proclaim the life changing message of the gospel.

> *Our Father, my guess this morning is there isn't a single person in the room that wants to be identified as the fool. So, God, give us ears to hear and eyes to see what's true about us so that we might make necessary changes to live as the wise. Lord, give us the discernment when we encounter the fool to respond in such a way that we don't add to the breakdown, but actually offer a different way that perhaps could lead to flourishing. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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