

How to Discern (and Deal With) a Fool in Your Midst

The Bible speaks of four different types of fools in the book of Proverbs, according to the Jewish sages. One of these fools is actually considered a positive term. Marvin Wilson, author of *Our Father Abraham*, has written incisively about the various meanings for the word *fool*:

“In Biblical wisdom literature, the pupils of the sages and mentors are the unwise, often termed ‘fools’ (Prov. 1:7) or ‘simple one’ (1:22). In wisdom literature, the different levels of fools—both young and old—are the raw material on which the sages had to work, and they represent the varying degrees of rawness. Perhaps as much as anything else, the term *fool* is descriptive of an attitude, bent of mind, or direction in life, which needs correcting. The various Hebrew words for *fool* occur more than a hundred times in the book of Proverbs.”

The reference to someone being a fool was not necessarily a negative term, in other words.

A **simple fool**, or *peti*, is a person who makes mistakes but quickly rights them and is restored to fellowship with God and with others. King David was a simple fool—one who made mistakes but kept a repentant heart toward God. This is why God did not turn away from him for his many sins.

The **hardened fool**, *kesil* and *ewil*, is someone who makes mistakes but never learns from them and will not listen to others. Such people can expect God’s reproof to continue and are said to “eat the fruit of their own way” (Prov. 1:31). The hardened fool “returns to his own vomit.” King Saul was a hardened fool, one who made mistakes and continued in them even after he realized he was wrong.

We’re going to err in our ways. The question is, once we know we’ve made a mistake before God, do we make the necessary adjustments that will allow Him to intervene on our behalf?

And will we avoid the same course of action in the future? God says that if we do, He will pour out His Spirit on us (see Prov. 1:23). He will make known His words to us.

The third level of fool mentioned in Proverbs is the **mocking fool**, or *letz*. The mocking fool mocks the things of God. This word means “scoffer” or “scorner.” When you encounter cynical people who disregard the things of God, you know these people are mocking fools.

The fourth level of fool is the **God-denying fool**, or *nabal*. This term relates to the morally wicked person who ignores the disgrace he brings on his family and who despises holiness (see Prov. 17:21). This person says, “There is no God.” By failing to acknowledge God for who He is, the nabal declares himself to be a God-denying fool.

I have found it helpful to try to understand if people are teachable. Are they simple fools—those who make mistakes but seek to learn from them? I can work with those people.

But if I sense I am working with a hardened fool, I know I should not spend much time on that person. Jesus did not spend much time trying to convince the rich young ruler. He presented truth and then let the young man make his decision. Some people must get broken before they can become simple fools. Sometimes it is simply better to let Satan chew on people until the ground is fertile enough to present truth to them.

Ask God to make you a simple fool who learns from your mistakes and gains wisdom as a result.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Prov. 1:7).

Os Hillman is president of Marketplace Leaders and author of *Change Agent* and *TGIF Today God Is First*, a free email devotional.