

THE BIBLICAL FOOL

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One of the most important truths to parenting or educating children is their human nature. In Proverbs 22:15, Scripture declares that foolishness is bound in the heart of every child. The Proverbial concept of a fool not only defines human nature, it also references humanity's position to God and specifically to divine wisdom; it clearly describes who can receive God's wisdom. While the term *biblical fool* can refer to one who has a hardened heart, which is set against God, the term is also used to describe the natural hearts of all unregenerate people without understanding of divine wisdom.¹

General Description

Scripture states that a fool is anyone who trusts in his own mind over God's wisdom and sets his attention inward. For example, Proverbs 28:26 states this important definition: "Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered."² Waltke points out that the word *fool* is often used in Proverbs "as a standard of comparison for one who is wise in his own eyes."³ He also notes that this verse implies the depravity of the human heart and its need for divine wisdom.⁴ Based on this understanding, everyone without God's wisdom is naturally a fool.⁵ It is no wonder that Proverbs 22:15 declares that foolishness is bound in the heart of every child, since the natural bent of every child is to trust in his own mind.⁶ Proverbs 22:15 has even been called "the doctrine of 'original folly.'"⁷ Though

¹ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 93-94; Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 39-42

² Cohen writes that the fool is one who "neglects the principles of wisdom and follows his own judgment" (Abraham Cohen, *Proverbs* [London: Soncino Press, 1973], 192). Likewise, Longman comments: "To trust in one's own heart (note the linkage by contrast to the second colon of the previous proverb) is the epitome of folly because the heart is limited in its knowledge and also, apart from relationship with God, wicked" (Longman, 496-97). Wiersbe sees the comparison between the fool's pride and Satan's lie to mankind in the Garden of Eden: "You will be like God (Gen 3:5; NKJV)" Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Skillful: Tapping God's Guidebook to Fulfillment* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 77.

³ Waltke, 1-15, 50.

⁴ Waltke, 15-31, 427.

⁵ Kidner writes, "The fact the fool, by whatever name he goes, is by definition one whose mind is closed, for the present, at least, to God (like the *nabal* of Psa 14:1) and to reason (like the *Nabal* of whom of whom his wife said, 'One cannot speak to him', 1 Sam 25:17), since he has rejected the first principle of wisdom, the fear of the Lord" (*Proverbs*, 41).

⁶ Longman comments on Proverbs 22:15 that "the first colon states the sorry condition of youth, and the second gives the prescription for rectifying the problem. . . . The 'heart,' roughly equivalent to what we would call character, of the young is bad. The term 'stupidity' is closely associated with folly. It takes the application of discipline to remove their stupidity, which is so integrally and naturally a part of a person" (408). Whereas Proverbs 22:15 focuses on the foolishness of the natural heart of every child and the necessary remedy being the rod of discipline, Proverbs 29:15 states that wisdom, the antithesis of foolishness, is the benefit of discipline. Whybray writes that when a child is "freed from proper discipline" he will shame his mother (R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 402). Motivating a foolish child to receive wisdom requires

born foolish, the one who walks in God's wisdom will be delivered (Proverbs 28:26).⁸ Although the context of Proverbs would indicate that deliverance in verse 26 is general in nature (from danger, social problems, and even death), Longman has the New Testament perspective in mind and sees this passage as also explaining future salvation that Christ would accomplish.⁹ Both in temporal and eternal applications, God's wisdom is the antithesis of the fool/self-reliance.¹⁰ Proverbs 3:5-6 also states a similar idea, contrasting self-trust with whole-hearted trust in the Lord through intimate relationship with Him.¹¹ The common characteristics of all three types of biblical fools are that they live in pursuit of their desires,¹² they lack divine wisdom,¹³ they are headed toward destruction,¹⁴ "they are characterized by lack of self-control" (Proverbs 12:16),¹⁵ they have a naturally high opinion of themselves, and they behave foolishly (by doing so they reflect the absence of God's wisdom in their lives; Proverbs 13:16).¹⁶

verbal teaching but also physical instruction (William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], 565). See also Cohen, 148.

⁷ Whybray, 125.

⁸ Longman notes that the walking of the wise is in keeping with the proverbial metaphor of *the way*. In light of New Testament truths, one can see the idea of progressive sanctification as the disciple, who has received wisdom, walks with Christ, who is wisdom (497).

⁹ Longman, 497; Waltke sees the deliverance of the wise referring to the Lord's punishment of fools (1:32-33; 2:20-22) (15-31, 427-28).

¹⁰ "Wisdom entails fear of Yahweh (1:7) and an aversion to self-reliance (3:5, 7; 26:12; 27:1; 28:11)" (Longman, 497).

¹¹ The prepositional phrases "unto Yahweh" and "unto your own discernment" are antithetical, or as Phillips points out, "They are two rival ways of thinking, two antagonists. The one leaves me locked into my own inborn foolishness and waywardness (Prov 12:15; 22:15; cf. Ps. 51:5). The other puts me in the way of God" (*God's Wisdom in Proverbs: Hearing God's Voice in Scripture* [The Woodlands, Tex: Kress Biblical Resources, 2011], 136).

¹² Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, Pa.: Shepherd Press, 1995), 106; Cohen, 6; Waltke, 1-15, 202-4.

¹³ See Kidner's discussion on *nabal* (*Proverbs*, 41); Waltke, 1-15, 111-12; Paul points out in Titus 3:3 that prior to receiving Christ, all Christians were foolish (*anoetos*) or without understanding (Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990], 224); Cohen, 6.

¹⁴ Longman, 497; Waltke, 15-31, 428.

¹⁵ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-30*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 344; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 97; Cohen, 76.

¹⁶ "*Paras*, glossed *spreads out* (*yipros*), takes as its objects a garment, fishing net, snare, and so on. Here it is used metaphorically with the particular sense of 'to display,' 'like a peddler who openly spreads his wares before the gaze of all men.' Its parallels are 'proclaims' (12:13) and 'gushes' (15:3). By its antithesis to 'take cover' ('to protect himself'), 'to spread out folly' entails that he ruins himself thereby. Among other things the fool shows his annoyance at once (12:16)" (Waltke, 1-15, 298, 566-67); Longman, 288-89.

While Scripture considers all unsaved who are capable of understanding divine wisdom to be fools,¹⁷ believers can also play the fool by trusting in their own minds and behaving accordingly. In Ephesians 5:17 Paul reveals this truth by giving the believer an imperative: “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is [wisdom].”¹⁸ Even those who possess God’s wisdom can behave foolishly when they lack right desire to please the Lord, focus their attention and trust on Him, and demonstrate in their behaviors that they are walking in the flesh.

Specific Types

Although Proverbs uses the word *fool* in a general sense to describe all people who are able to understand and accept divine wisdom yet they have not received God’s wisdom,¹⁹ Proverbs also describes three specific types of fools:²⁰ (1) the simple, naïve, or “inexperienced” fool (Proverbs 14:15),²¹ (2) the dull, stupid, or “ordinary fool”²² (Proverbs 1:32; 26:11; 27:22),²³ and (3) the scornful, mocker, or “hardened” fool (Proverbs 1:22, 29; 3:34-35; 14:6-7; 19:29).²⁴ Waltke explains Proverbs’ use of these names:

These ethical terms imply the fool’s moral culpability, not his lack of intelligence. The wisdom terms for the unwise, however, are not correlatives but distinguish three of four classes of fools according to their educative capacities: the gullible, the fool, and the mocker.²⁵

¹⁷ Waltke writes that “Proverbs divides humanity into two classes: the wise and righteous over against fools and the wicked. These wisdom and ethical terms are correlative, for though they do not mean the same thing, they have the same referent” (1-15, 93).

¹⁸ Lincoln comments on Ephesians 5:17: “Those who have already been exhorted not to live as unwise people in v 15 are now again warned not to succumb to folly. . . . The contrast between wise and unwise is now replaced by that between being foolish and having understanding. Just as the children of light will learn what is pleasing to the Lord (5:10), so those who are wise will understand what the will of the Lord is. Indeed, understanding the will of the Lord is the heart of wisdom (cf. also Col 1:9, ‘filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding’). For believers, wise living involves a practical perception dependent on the direction of their Lord” (Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42 of Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1990], 342-43).

¹⁹ The book of Proverbs contains three different Hebrew words along with three different names to describe fools. Some commentators include a sluggard as potentially a fourth type of fool. For more reading on the three types of proverbial fools, see Waltke, 1-15, 109-15 and Kidner, *Proverbs*, 39-42.

²⁰ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 39-41; Waltke, 1-15, 93-94.

²¹ Waltke, 15-31, 252; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 39.

²² Kidner, *Proverbs*, 42.

²³ Many theologians see the three Hebrew words *kesil*, ‘*evil*, and *nabal* as best describing the ordinary fool, though they note that these “terms are virtually interchangeable” with the other names of the simple fool and the scorner (Ibid., 39-41); Waltke, 1-15, 93-94.

²⁴ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 41-42, Waltke, 1-15, 114.

²⁵ Waltke, 1-15, 111.

As Waltke emphasizes, the determining factor for a fool is not his intellectual capabilities, but rather his lack of God's wisdom and trust in the fool's own understanding.²⁶

General Applications

All children (and adults) who should understand and receive divine wisdom yet are without it are biblical fools: either being a simple fool, an ordinary fool, or a hardened fool (scorner). Biblical understanding of the fool is important in order for biblical parental discipline to occur. Specifically, having this understanding helps parents discern the current direction of the child through both his reactions to God's wisdom as well his behaviors, which can reveal the position of his foolish heart.

Understanding Rather Than Labeling

Although, a child may be a type of proverbial fool and engage in foolish behaviors, you are wise to refrain from using the term *fool* or one of the specific names (such as calling your child gullible or a scorner) to describe your child since doing so could easily confuse or even anger him or her.²⁷ Proverbs utilizes the names and words for fool to provide understanding to the reader and warn the child against ignoring or refusing divine wisdom.²⁸ In other words, these terms help the reader to know where a heart is in relationship to God and his wisdom and thus to understand his current direction in life and his projected destination as well as to gain practical advice on how to better educate him. This understanding of the proverbial fool also provides parents and children warning against these types of dangerous and destructive hearts.

Along the same lines, the theological metaphor of a path or way found throughout the book of Proverbs suggests that the designations of wise and foolish represent the two options one has in life.²⁹ A person can choose the way of wisdom/life (progressing in sanctification) or choose the natural destructive way of folly/death (progressively moving away from divine wisdom).³⁰ There exists no moral neutrality. This metaphor emphasizes the idea that the term is more than a label: it denotes direction and ultimately destination.³¹ People are always moving further away from God – going from a simple fool to an ordinary fool to a hardened fool – or they are drawing closer to him through wisdom. Therefore,

²⁶ Cohen notes that fools are not intellectually stupid: "They are morally, rather than intellectually, defective, and despise a father's correction" (3).

²⁷ Merriam-Webster's dictionary offers four definitions including: "A harmlessly deranged person or one lacking in common powers of understanding" (s. v. "fool," available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fool>; Internet; accessed 14 April 2014). Such definitions differ from the biblical idea of a fool and are commonly thought of when the word is used.

²⁸ Waltke writes concerning the book of Proverbs preamble that it "was written for parents and teachers who will use the book, articulates the book's aim (1:2-6) and its addressees, namely, Israel's educable youth (4-5)." The preamble, coupled with the prologue and title, leads Waltke to conclude that the book is written to know wisdom and to understand its expression (1-15, 174).

²⁹ Longman, 300, 497; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 54-56.

³⁰ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 55-56; "One must decide between wisdom begotten by God and folly that stands as wisdom's rival" (Waltke, 1-15, 125).

³¹ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 54-56

rather than calling children by these terms, you can use their understanding to best approach your child and instruct him toward divine wisdom.

God's Counsel Rather Than Human wisdom

Scripture also offers insight into how parents should wisely educate their children. Proverbs 22:6, when understood within the whole context of Proverbs, which is centered on the education of divine wisdom, reveals the parents' responsibility not only to discern their child's natural bent, but also to dedicate/train that child toward the right way. In other words, parents are first responsible to direct the child's life. Waltke emphasizes that the *dedication* of the child to *his way* implies that the child is young and still pliable/teachable.³² Parents are to dedicate their child "according to his (the child's) way,"³³ or "according to the physical and mental abilities of the developing youth."³⁴ Waltke notes, however, that the child's natural way, no matter how unique the child might be, is foolish/inwardly focused.³⁵ Therefore parents must dedicate or wisely decide to approach the child where he is at in reference to wisdom and his ability to understand. Similarly, McKane states,

'According to his way' does not mean 'according to the way he ought to go'. The thought that the educational process must be tailored to the requirements of the individual is not at all what is intended. There is only one right way—the way of life—and the educational discipline which directs young men along this way is uniform.³⁶

This principle truth assumes, of course, that children are better able to understand divine wisdom as they mature. Nonetheless, instruction should begin at an early age.³⁷ Waltke states: "In sum, the proverb implies that the religious and moral initiation of the youth should be oriented from the first to counteract his foolish way."³⁸ McKane also writes, "The importance of education for the young is also stressed in verse 6. This is the age when impressionability can be taken for granted and when change for the better is possible."³⁹ If parents see at an early age that children have specific foolish traits bound up within their hearts as observed in their actions (e.g., they are more resistant to listening to their authority, are lazy, or are loud and boisterous), then they should recognize these behaviors as indicators of the child's heart and direction and begin "both to tear down and to build up" the child.⁴⁰

³² Waltke, 15-31, 204; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 37.

³³ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 147.

³⁴ Waltke, 15-31, 204-5.

³⁵ Waltke points out, "The other six references to *na'ar* univocally characterize his way as foolish" (*ibid.*, 205).

³⁶ McKane, 564.

³⁷ *Betimes*: "from his early days" (Kidner, *Proverbs*, 51, 105).

³⁸ Waltke, 15-31, 205. Waltke also emphasizes that Proverbs 22:6 promises the educator or parent that his initial and carefully chosen approach (asking God for wisdom) to educating his child will have a permanent effect on the child for his good.

³⁹ McKane, 564.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 564-65.

Though all people need to receive divine wisdom, not everyone will.⁴¹ Wisdom presents herself as available to three types of individuals: the simple fool, the ordinary fool, and the wise (those who received understanding and no longer are considered gullible or foolish).⁴² Proverbs 1:4-5 states: “To give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth – Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.”⁴³ Kidner states of Proverbs 1:1-5, “Wisdom is the would-be guide of everyman . . . it is available to the veriest dunce.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Proverbs 8:1-5 reveals wisdom’s invitation:

Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud: “To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the children of man. O simple ones, learn prudence; O fools, learn sense.

With the exception of the scoffer, wisdom presents herself as available to fools and wise alike.

The Gullible or Young man

In the book of Proverbs two parallel terms are used to describe children: the *gullible* (*petaim*) and the *young* (*na’ar*; see 22:6).⁴⁵ The youth or the gullible are children from infancy to thirty years of age,⁴⁶ and they are all children who are immature and without experience or understanding in the world.⁴⁷ Waltke points out, “Though intellectually flawed, the *petaim* ‘raw youths,’ are the mildest sorts of fools, for they are malleable, are capable of being shaped and improved by the educational process (1:4; 8:5; 12:25; 21:11), and still have hope of joining the company of the wise (cf. 1:22; 9:4).”⁴⁸ For it is they, the simple (*P’etā’yim*), who are the object of wisdom’s appeal: “Education in wisdom is offered primarily to the ingenuous youth, who is open to all manner of influence and in great danger of being led astray.”⁴⁹

⁴¹ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 37-38.

⁴² Longman, 98, 197; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 37; Waltke, 1-15, 111; Cohen, 2. Wiersbe sees Proverbs 1:22 as an invitation from wisdom that includes the scoffer, though no invitation is actually given in this verse (*Be Skillful*, 71). Proverbs 1:22 is more of an introductory definition of each type of fool than it is an invitation to wisdom.

⁴³ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 37; Longman, 95-97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁵ Waltke notes, “The parallel to *petaim* [*the gullible*], the *young* (*na’ar*; see 22:6) places the morally brainless *peti* in an age group that extends from infancy (Exod 2:6; 1 Sam 1:22, 24; 4:21) to a seventeen-year-old (Gen. 37:2), to a thirty-year-old (Gen. 41:12; cf. 41:46), and so presumably to any age before being reckoned an *elder* (*zaqen*; see 17:6; 20:29). The distinction pertains as well to the case of inexperience versus experience (cf. 2 Sam 14:21; 18:5; Jer. 1:6)” (Waltke, 1-15, 178).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁷ Cohen, 2; Longman, 96-97; Waltke also notes that this is a youth who lacks sense (1-15, 113).

⁴⁸ Waltke, 1-15, 111.

⁴⁹ Raymond Edward Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland Edmund Murphy, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 497.

Though Proverbs has all children in mind,⁵⁰ the child in Proverbs whom the father addresses is a gullible male child most likely moving toward physical maturity. Waltke states, “In this book the *na’ar* is on the threshold of maturity, and a decision to join the wise is imperative in order to have the sage’s knowledge.”⁵¹ In keeping with Proverbs and the historical context, the father’s address to his older child was not his first time teaching his son divine wisdom. Waltke points out that in Jewish culture intense teaching began at an early age. He notes:

The father began the stern teaching soon after the child had been weaned, to judge from the example of Samuel (cf. Prov 20:11; 22:6). As soon as Hannah had weaned Samuel, she brought him to the temple at Shiloh, where the high priest Eli immediately began Samuel’s tutelage (cf. 1 Sam 1). In the ancient Near East weaning happened after three years of age.⁵²

Waltke concludes that Proverbs 4:3 indicates that the child was very young, inexperienced, and completely dependent upon his father and mother when his education began.⁵³ The wisdom presented in Proverbs was not withheld from the son prior to his moving toward maturity, but was taught to him by Solomon from the earliest of years, just as Solomon had learned from his father.⁵⁴ Phillips also sees this important truth:

Solomon taught his son while he was young to “treasure up” his commands (2:1), knowing that the application might have been a while in coming. Of course we must be wise and age-appropriate. We must not hold a child responsible for what is impossible for their stage of growth (i.e., a ten-month-old probably is not ready to make his bed or empty the trash). At the same time, many parents expect far too little of their children, and thus end up with immature youth. Think of this particularly in terms of obedience. We should start expecting our child to respect and obey us from the earliest reasonable days. I have observed for many years that far too many parents simply do not expect to be obeyed. If a child can obey, then he should be required to obey.⁵⁵

Although you should not consider most seven-year-olds to be proverbial sluggards, they should recognize that Proverbs has an individual’s chosen outlook and destination in view.⁵⁶ The child may not be a sluggard or a scorner, but their slothful attitude and behaviors reveal the direction of their heart. Often society thinks of child-like behavior as reflecting the child’s immaturity, but Proverbs sees these behaviors as indicating the child’s direction if not turned from his natural way. Tripp writes:

The other pitfall is an inability to work from behavior to the appropriate character issues. This results in seeing only isolated bits of behavior. The result again is failure to address long-term character goals. . . . You must be a person of

⁵⁰ Murphy states the intended audience of Proverbs and the universal implications. He writes, “It should be emphasized that ‘my son’ is not to be taken in a gender exclusive sense. This book is for all Israel, and the observations deal with universal human experience, except in very few cases” (Rowland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, vol. 22 of Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1998], 12).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 277-78.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 278; Tedd Tripp compares the ordinary fool’s desires and fears to the normal vocabulary of a three-year-old. He goes on to point out that all children are born with a heart of folly (106).

⁵⁴ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 51, 105.

⁵⁵ Phillips, 283.

⁵⁶ “It must always be remembered that the book has in mind a man’s chosen outlook” (Kidner, *Proverbs*, 40); see also Longman, 300.

long-term vision. You must see your children's need for shepherding, not simply in terms of the here and now, but in terms of long-range vision.⁵⁷

In other words, the child's behavior reveals his heart's direction and the person he is becoming. Without a change of heart, the child's natural course is to follow his foolish/immature heart. Foolishness is in fact bound in the heart of every child (Proverbs 22:15): they are undisciplined, inexperienced, and without knowledge, so they act accordingly. Foolishness in verse 15, "refers to delinquency which is here said to be bound up in a child, i.e., a natural state in the early period of life."⁵⁸ Much of what is considered to be normal child-like immaturity in relation to ADHD behaviors is actually behavior that reflects a foolish heart, which Proverbs also addresses. Longman writes:

One important purpose of the book is to give prudence to the simpleminded. Parallel to this is the intention to give knowledge and discretion to the "young" (*na'ar*). The *na'ar* usually is chronologically young, typically an adolescent and unmarried, though in any case, another nuance of the word might also come into play in the present context, and that is 'immature.' The *na'ar* is immature and needs the knowledge and discretion that will be provided by the book of Proverbs.⁵⁹

Parents cannot assume that the simple child will grow out of immature habits (foolishness), but instead, they must practice biblical parental discipline and impart prudence to their children.⁶⁰ Kidner discusses both aspects of biblical parental discipline in his study of the word *wisdom* and states, "The two terms [*instruction* and *correction*] together can be summed up as *discipline*"⁶¹ The common juxtaposition of the simple fool and the prudent is important in Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 14:18 where each is known by his heart's condition). The simple fool is known by his stupidity, and the prudent child is honored for his observable knowledge.⁶² If left to himself, the simple fool will "metaphorically" inherit foolishness.⁶³ In other words, he will end up being as immature as when he first began. Trusting in his own way has left him with all that his heart possesses – his own foolishness. The one who receives moral truths, however, will inherit honor and dignity.

Solomon's son is not presented in Proverbs as a sluggard, an ordinary fool, or a scorner, yet his father still warned him not to choose those outlooks and ways of life. The same is true with young children. Children as young as three or four years of age can be taught and can understand important wisdom that is relevant to their immediate lives as well as warning them of the destination of their natural way. Immaturity is expected from the foolish heart, but the application of wisdom will drive it far from him.

⁵⁷ Tripp, 181-82.

⁵⁸ Cohen, 148.

⁵⁹ Longman, 97.

⁶⁰ "Prudence" describes one's ability to use reason, in context under the fear of God, to navigate the problems of life. Prudence carefully considers a situation before rushing in. It implies cool headedness" (Longman, 97). Prudence addresses the child's impulsivity, lack of self-control, and immaturity directly. Divine wisdom gives the student *knowledge* and *prudence*, which allow him to "walk the path of life in a constructive way and to avoid the lures of the evil path (Prov 2:11)" (ibid.).

⁶¹ *Proverbs*, 36.

⁶² The *crown* is a typical metaphor in Proverbs for honor. This passage implies that behaviors that are produced from the heart are in mind, since others can discern what is in the child's heart (Longman, 302-3; Steveson, 191).

⁶³ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 109.

Scripture gives parents the wisdom necessary to approach all types of children. Young children who are diagnosed with ADHD (whether saved or unsaved) are most likely immature⁶⁴ and simple, but though lacking understanding, they have a teachable spirit⁶⁵ which allows them to hear wisdom (Prov 1:8; 14:18) and to receive correction (Prov 20:30; 22:15; 23:14).⁶⁶ Scripture provides several ways that parents can impart divine wisdom to their children, yet two methods, the “rod” and “reproof”, are named specifically in Proverbs for addressing child-like foolishness. The rod and reproof are not only vital to a simple child’s moral education, but also functional in his life (Prov 10:13; 22:15; 29:15).⁶⁷ Waltke writes concerning Proverbs 19:18 and the father’s need to place hope in wise discipline,

The imprecise antithetical parallels imply that the father’s hope in discipline is to impart to his clinical offspring eternal life, the opposite of death, and that a failure to discipline the son is tantamount to participating in killing him (cf. 11:7, 23; 13:24; 20:30; 22:6, 15; 23:13, 14; 29:15)... The proverb assumes both that folly is bound up in the heart of the child, and that the rod of discipline will drive it far from him (22:15).⁶⁸

You can only encourage your children to choose divine wisdom, you cannot force it upon them. No amount of pressure, pain, or lectures will be enough to change the child’s heart (Prov 27:22). Ultimately, the child is responsible to choose the path that he will take in life – whether wisdom or folly.

The Wise

As with a child or young adult without wisdom, the one who has already received divine wisdom (a believer) needs to continue to acquire it. Longman states:

Wisdom is not gained by a onetime decision, but a decision followed by a lifetime of discipline. It is a rigorous endeavor, involving study as well as self-control, especially in light of the apparent rewards from going on the easier path of the wicked.⁶⁹

The wise must continue to receive wisdom. This reality is specifically applicable when parents have a young child who has been diagnosed with ADHD and has also made a profession of faith. Many times it can be unclear if his salvation decision was genuine or not, since his lifestyle is characterized by frequent participation in foolish behavior. In other words, he is not merely engaging in foolish behavior every so often as young children do, but is known by his foolish behaviors. As was noted previously from Ephesians 5:17, believers can behave foolishly if they lack understanding or choose to live according to their natural way. Parents should expect that younger children who profess to know God will still behave foolishly at times, which the rod and reproof can remedy. A child who is in the company of the wise will respond to correction and reproof differently than a simpleton, an ordinary fool, or a scorner. Whether

⁶⁴ Secularists also recognize this characteristic. See Paul Wender, *ADHD: Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Children, Adolescents, and Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28.

⁶⁵ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 39.

⁶⁶ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 141; Cohen, 137, 148, 154; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 152; Waltke, 15-31, 251-53.

⁶⁷ Waltke writes, “Fools must be corrected both by caning and by rebuke (see also 26:3-5). They cannot save themselves because they return to their folly as dogs to vomit (26:11)” (Waltke, 1-15, 461-62).

⁶⁸ Waltke, 15-31, 112.

⁶⁹ Longman, 152.

the child is a simpleton or in the company of the wise, parents need to earnestly teach and admonish since both types of children can receive and need God's wisdom.

The Ordinary Fool

Unlike the simple who is gullible, the ordinary or stupid fool is consumed with his own opinion (Prov 15:28)⁷⁰ and, to his own peril, perceives that he does not need advice (Prov 14:12).⁷¹ In essence, he views his wisdom as more important than God's wisdom, and he acts in accordance; he struggles – as does the simpleton – with pride. Whereas the scorner hates reproof (Proverbs 9:7-8),⁷² the ordinary fool does not always hate those who confront him. Instead, he ignores, rejects, or does not benefit from the rod, rebuke, and correction (Prov 17:10).⁷³ Proverbs 26:4-5 indicates that parents must discern how to best approach a fool. For the fool's own sake, parents should not always engage him (Prov 26:4). Yet lest he become prouder and potentially harden his heart beyond hope, parents should sometimes give him an answer (Prov 26:5).⁷⁴

The Scoffer

In contrast to the natural fool (simple) and the ordinary fool, the scoffer has arrogantly (Prov 21:24) made up his mind that he wants nothing to do with God, his wisdom, or those of like-mind (Prov 13:1). In fact, he not only despises God's wisdom (Prov 23:9) and those who attempt to reprove and correct him (Prov 9:7-8), he is bent on leading others away from divine truth (Prov 21:24). Though he may hate those who wisely confront him, there is potential benefit to the simple to see the hardened fool confronted and corrected (Prov 19:25). Though it may be rare for a child as young as twelve years old to become an ordinary fool or a scorner, it is possible that a child this young could hate God and his wisdom.⁷⁵ Scripture does not place age limitations on who can be a simpleton, an ordinary fool, or a scoffer but always bases one's position upon his or her treatment and understanding of divine wisdom (e.g., Romans

⁷⁰ His high opinion of his own thoughts cause him to be impulsive and blurt out his own opinion that is contrary to wisdom (Longman, 322); see also Kidner, *Proverbs*, 40.

⁷¹ Waltke, 1-15, 533; Cohen writes that the fool is "defined as one who is 'insensible to moral truth and acts without regard to it'" (6); see also Kidner, *Proverbs*, 108.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 114; Cohen, 53.

⁷³ Waltke, 1-15, 111; Cohen, 113. In the New Testament, Peter refers to Proverbs 26:11 in stating that it is better for the fool (in this context the *fool* refers to the apostate who once appeared to be a believer; D. Edmond Hiebert, *Second Peter and Jude* [Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1989], 133.) if he had not even heard of the way of righteousness (remained simple), than to have seemingly embraced it and then to have turned his back on the sacred command (2 Pet 2:20-22). This warning does not imply that the simple are not culpable for their lack of understanding, only that there are worse eternal consequences for the one who deliberately rejects or ignores God's wisdom.

⁷⁴ Waltke, 15-31, 349-50; Kidner, *Proverbs*, 162.

⁷⁵ Tripp discusses that if foolishness is permitted to grow in the heart of a child, by the time he is a teenager, he may be rebellious and "not allow anyone to rule him" (106).

1:18-32; “claiming to be wise they became fools”). Since ODD behaviors⁷⁶ can in fact, reveal a hardened heart in older children, you should not exclude consideration that a middle-school-aged child or older may already hate divine wisdom and established authority.

The Heart Rather Than Behaviors

The heart of man remains the core issue, and behaviors are merely its product. As is discussed in the main body of this book, the human tendency is to judge children and others by their observable and repeated behaviors and then to label them (e.g., one who paints repeatedly is called a painter and one who smokes is labeled as a smoker). The behaviors of the fool, however, do not make him a fool but reveal what he is. Waltke states this reality concisely: “A wise heart produces righteous behavior, and a foolish heart produces wicked behavior.”⁷⁷ Additionally, though differences exist among them, all three types of fools have similarly foolish mindsets and behaviors. For example, Kidner points out that to the simple fool, “folly is fun (Prov 15:21)” and the ordinary fool, in the same way, “likes his folly (Prov 20:4).”⁷⁸ As the heart becomes more hardened, a pattern of foolish behavior typically becomes more distinguished as observable rebellion.⁷⁹

Teenagers who are from believing families and are diagnosed with ADHD because of their disobedience and complacency most likely fall into the second category of fools. This generality assumes that parents are walking with God and have diligently and wisely corrected and instructed, yet these children have chosen to ignore divine wisdom and, instead, live foolishly.

Although Proverbs’ principle discussion is on moral education (divine and practical wisdom), the book’s consideration also includes temporal instructions from authorities (such as a parent commanding the son to stay seated).⁸⁰ The child must obey his parents because all authority in his life is established by God and represents God’s authority (Rom 13:1-5).⁸¹ If a child who is able to understand, rejects his

⁷⁶ For Barkley’s description of ODD behaviors, see Russell A. Barkley, *Taking Charge of ADHD: A Complete Authoritative Guide for Parents*, rev. ed. (New York: Guilford, 2000), 169.

⁷⁷ Waltke, 1-15, 93.

⁷⁸ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 39-40.

⁷⁹ Generally speaking, a child is known by his behaviors, but the very essence of a hypocrite is one who acts differently than the true nature of his heart (s.v. “hypocrite”; available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypocrite>; accessed 14 April 2014). Although behaviors can reveal the heart, parents should be careful to not make the mistake of assuming a young child, whose behavior is seemingly out of control to be scornful or rebellious. Likewise, an older child who is calm and not hyper, loud, or destructive may still be a scorner at heart. Therefore, you should discern by your child’s treatment of God’s wisdom rather than by merely their behaviors as to their position before God.

⁸⁰ Waltke, 1-15, 352.

⁸¹ The context of Romans 13 is speaking of political authorities, yet all authority, including parental authority, is established by God. Hodge writes, “**Governing authorities** means those in authority without reference to their status or character. We are to be subject not only to the *supreme* authorities, but to all who have authority over us. The abstract word **authorities** is used for those who are invested with power (Luke 12:11; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; etc.). The word **governing** is applied to anyone who is greater than us in dignity and authority. In 1 Peter 2:13 it is applied to the king as supreme – that is, superior to all other governing authorities” (Charles Hodge, *Romans*, Crossway Classic Commentaries [Wheaton: Crossway, 1993], Ro 13:1). See also James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*

parents' temporal commands, he is in essence rejecting God's wisdom, since God expects him to honor and obey his parents (Eph 6:1-3). Tedd Tripp sees the connection between the child's obedience to his parents and his obedience to God: "It is a question of authority. Will the child live under the authority of God and therefore the authority of his parents, or under his own authority — driven by his wants and passions?"⁸²

Because of this God-given authority, parents and teachers who instruct a child diagnosed with ADHD to remain in his seat should expect him to obey, if he is of an age that he is able to understand. Obedience to authority in all areas of life, then, must be connected ultimately by the parents to the child's acceptance of God's wisdom by faith. Believing parents should want their children to obey them, but for the right reason. The Jewish commentator Cohen notes the teacher's emphasis on appealing to the heart rather than merely focusing on behavior. He writes:

This saying [Proverbs 17:10] well illustrates how the efforts of the Wisdom writers were concentrated on the appeal to the inner man, i.e., on the foundation of character, the most essential part of education. Here the writer states the widely recognized fact of the sensitiveness, in the best sense, of refined and exalted character in contrast to the thick-skinned unimpressionableness of a 'fool.'⁸³

The time will come in every child's life that obedience to parents will no longer be necessary: when he is mature and leaves his father and mother. The true authority, however, under which he obeyed them remains over his life. The heart of the child must be educated, rather than temporarily controlled. If parents do not teach their children to please God as the right motivation to obey their God ordained authorities, then they fail in one aspect to teach their children divine wisdom. If parents have taught their teen the right motivation for obedience, then for the child to disobey repeatedly is evidence of the child's foolish rejection of God's wisdom as well.

Again, it is important to stress that it is the natural tendency of a young child who is still teachable to forget instruction and repeat folly. He most likely is an immature simpleton who needs discipline rather than an ordinary fool who is apathetic. As he gets older and continues to ignore godly parental instruction, however, he begins to distinguish himself as an ordinary fool and not just one who is gullible.

Conclusion

When Scripture refers to someone as a fool, it does not imply that he lacks intelligence, but that he lacks divine wisdom. Though it is best to not call a child a *fool*, the biblical concepts are nonetheless key to right anthropology and to both understanding and helping the child whom secularists have diagnosed as having ADHD.

9–16, vol. 38B of Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 771; F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 235–37.

⁸² Earlier in the same section, Tripp writes that a fool is one who lives according to his wants and desires and that this reality qualifies all unsaved children as fools (106).

⁸³ Cohen, 113.

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