

The Spotters' Guide to the... Simple

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0:00] And now we're going to turn to our Bible reading this evening. Paul Brennan, one of our ministers, is giving us a spotter's guide to some of the people we meet in Proverbs.

And as he begins this evening, we're going to be reading from Proverbs chapter one. If you don't have a Bible with you, we've got plenty of church visitors' Bibles.

It's always good to read along and follow along as we open up the scriptures together. They're spread around the auditorium. If you don't know where they are, wave your hand. Margo's ready to bring one to you and do follow along.

It's page 527 if you're using one of those church visitors' Bibles. And it's Proverbs chapter one. And we're going to read from verse 20 through to the end of the chapter.

Proverbs chapter one, verse 20. Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the market she raises her voice.

[0:59] At the head of the noisy street she cries out. At the entrance of the city gate she speaks. How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you.

I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded.

Because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when terror strikes you.

When terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind. When distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer.

[1:58] They will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel, despised all my reproof.

Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them.

But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster. Well, amen.

This is God's word, and we'll return to it shortly. Well, good evening folks. It would be helpful to have your Bibles open and turn to the book of Proverbs.

Have it open at chapter 1, although we'll be flicking around a little bit, looking at different verses here and there through the book of Proverbs. But do have chapter 1 open in front of you.

[3:11] Now we've probably all seen it happen. We've seen someone being warned. Their friends can see it.

Their parents can see it. Others in the church can see it. But they can't see it themselves. They're convinced this relationship is different.

This investment really is safe. This person really is trustworthy. This friendship is not affecting me. It's a good friendship. And then, six months later, disaster.

And everyone's asking the same question. How? How do they not see it? Were they totally blind or was in front of their eyes? Sometimes the problem isn't that somebody lacks information or intelligence.

Sometimes the problem is what Proverbs would call they're simple. They're gullible. They're naive. And the slightly unsettling question that Proverbs poses for us tonight is do we perhaps know someone like that?

[4:24] Someone who Proverbs would describe as simple. Or maybe a bit more unsettling still, am I simple? The thing is, we need wisdom.

We need insight. The Bible has so much to say about our need for wisdom. Just think of Jesus' own words. His teaching about being wise for salvation.

It is the faithful and wise servant who will be blessed when the master returns. It's the wise virgin, not the foolish ones, who will be welcomed into joy with the bridegroom. It's the wise man who hears and does the word of Jesus.

Who alone will stand in the final judgments, not the fool who builds on the sands. Wisdom is essential for salvation, for eternal life according to Jesus.

But it's also essential for our maturity, our fruitful service for Christ, now and until the day he returns. Just listen to the Apostle Paul in Colossians chapter 1.

[5 : 30] Paul prays that the church will be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work.

See, wisdom, the wisdom the Bible offers, is essential for salvation and our service. wisdom, and the sort of wisdom the Bible holds out, it's not really talking about knowledge.

Rather, it's knowledge applied to life. It's lived out in the realm of the real world and real relationships. And Proverbs, this book we have open in front of us tonight, it's written so that you and I might have wisdom.

Wisdom for life in every aspect, and especially in our relationships. You see, the wise person creates, sustains, cherishes relationships in life and finds joy in them.

But the fool, the fool is one who disdains and destroys relationships and so damages and diminishes himself and his own life.

[6 : 43] And on the topic of relationships, friendships, there is an awful lot that Proverbs says about what sort of person to be.

But there's also a lot about how to read other people. It teaches us not only how to be wise, but how to read others wisely. Let me give you an example.

There's various characters you meet in the book of Proverbs. We're looking at two over this week and next. But here's another one. I'm not covering. It's the sluggard. Listen to chapter nine. Chapter six, sorry. Don't need to turn there.

Don't worry. We'll be flicking around all over the place. But Proverbs six, how long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man.

Now that proverb about the sluggard, it's not just an imperative commanding us not to be sluggards, is it? It is that, but it's not only that.

[7 : 50] It's also teaching us how to identify a sluggard and therefore to be wise about interacting with them. If you become friends with the sluggards, you'll find that if you take them out for lunch, they've always forgotten their wallet because they're in their overdraft or they've just overslept and they can't remember where it is.

So those verses like that, they're not just teaching you don't be like that. It's also teaching you how to identify that in others and so to respond accordingly.

Proverbs is teaching us relational wisdom, enabling us to relate well and to be a good reader of other people. That is crucial to living well and wisely.

One scholar puts it very simply, wisdom can be summarized as the ability to understand how life works in order to respond appropriately. Understanding the character of different kinds of people is necessary in order to know how to respond to them.

Now we encounter two sorts of people in our reading. Have a look at verse 22 of chapter 1. How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

[9 : 05] How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? This week and next, we're looking at two types of people. The simple and the scoffer.

This week, it's the simple. How do you identify a simple person according to Proverbs? How do you deal with a simple person? And then, slightly awkwardly at the end, what if you're simple?

What do you do? If you realize, actually, the Bible's putting its finger on you and saying, you're simple. Other words that can be translated simple would be gullible or naive.

Let me read you a couple of verses from Proverbs about the naive, the simple. Here's one from chapter 14. The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps.

The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge. And here's one from later on in chapter 22. The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it. [10 : 12] Now, there's a lot of verses we could read about the simple, and we'll mention lots of them through the course of the evening. But here's how one preacher sums up the simple person according to Proverbs.

The simple person is fundamentally vulnerable and undisciplined rather than deliberately wicked. He lacks discernment, is easily led into temptation, and could be corrected by wisdom, but chooses not to submit to his discipline.

They are not so much bad as irresponsible. That's a brief definition of what the simple is. But firstly, how do we spot the simple? Three things. As you look out at your friends and colleagues, can you spot any simple?

Three things. The simple person is quick to believe, too slow to see, and too easily led. So here's the first thing. The simple are too quick to believe.

[11 : 13] They are uncritical. The simple lacks sense. Listen to chapter 7. I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense.

And in chapter 9, both Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly equate being simple with lacking sense. They're very quick to believe things. They're slow to interrogate what is being presented to them. They're very accepting, very open. They're uncritical. They're the sort of person, when they receive an email saying this, congratulations, you have inherited 14 million pounds from a distant relative in outer Mongolia.

And they think, I did always wonder what Uncle Robert went to. At last, the money's coming my way. And so they reply, giving their bank details. There is, with the simple, there is a rightness about their openness, a willingness to believe the best in others, open to new experiences, new ideas, new people.

But theirs is an openness that never knows when to close the door. The door's always open, never gets shut. They lack sense to know when a particular course of action needs to be stopped in its tracks.

[12 : 31] They're gullible. They take everything at face value. They're not shrewd. Listen to chapter 14. The simple believes everything.

Contrasted to the prudent, the prudent gives thought to his steps. The simple person will believe the influencer on social media who says, they've discovered the secret to cryptocurrencies.

I can make you a millionaire in 12 months. All you need to do is sign up to my program for 150 pounds a month and you'll become a millionaire. They fall for it. The simple person believes that a bit of fun gambling on the results of my favorite football team, that will never be more than just a bit of fun.

I can keep a lid in it. And they start to gamble more to pay off the debts already accrued. They think that could never happen to them. The simple, they believe everything.

Too quick to believe. They're uncritical. That's the first angle you get in the book of Proverbs on the simple. The second is they're too slow to see. They are undiscerning.

[13 : 40] They are not insightful. They sometimes fail to see what is plain and clear to others. In chapter 19 we read this. Strike a scoffer and the simple will learn prudence.

The implication being that it takes radical action to help the simple see what is obvious to everybody else. For the simple to see a mocker for who they truly are, the mocker's got to be struck.

Severe action's got to be taken to help the simple see the point. Because up until that point they are thinking the best. They're naive. They're gullible. The simple are intellectually lazy.

Not willing to take the time to think things through, to see the reality of situations in front of them. They are not insightful. But that is not to say that the simple are unintelligent.

Don't make that mistake. Not at all. It's quite possible to have a huge brain and yet be simple according to the Bible. simple. The opposite of simple is not clever.

[14 : 56] The unsimple person sees reality clearly. They see it clearly enough to be able to respond appropriately and that is not equated with your educational level, your intelligence.

No, no, no. The simple can be very unsophisticated. So don't make that mistake of thinking because somebody's not been to university, they're not as educated as I am, they're not simple. Don't make that mistake.

The simple, they are too slow to see what's in front of them. They are undiscerning. Here's the third aspect. They are too easily led.

Too easily led. Too quick to believe, too slow to see and too easily led. And part of the issue is that sometimes the simple, they're just young.

Proverbs often associates being simple with being young. In chapter one, if you've got that open in front of you, have a look back at verse four, it says to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth.

[16:05] Often, simple and youth appear very close together. They're often equated. Chapter seven, I've seen among the simple, I've perceived among the youth, a young man lacking sense.

So there is this problem sometimes, a correlation between being young and being simple. Now, it's not a one-to-one ratio, so don't be looking around here, if you've got a few grey hairs on your head, looking around at the young, thinking, oh, they're all simple.

No, that's not what it's saying. Being young does not necessarily mean that you're automatically simple or gullible or naive, but often, often they can go together.

And equally, being older does not mean that you're not simple. Being old doesn't mean you can't be gullible or naive. But often there is a link with youth and the simple.

They are weak wills. In Proverbs 22, we read that the prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it. In chapter 27, we get exactly the same phrase repeated.

[17:12] We must need to hear it twice. I'll read it again. The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple, they go on and they suffer for it.

So even when a course of action is clearly misguided, the simple, they plow on. Perhaps they're afraid to say no to someone, to let somebody down. Maybe they're not wanting to seem narrow-minded or judgmental, they just want to go with the flow.

Saying yes is often easier, isn't it? And so the simple, they go on and they suffer for it. They're easily seduced. In chapter 7, it says this, with much seductive speech, she persuades him.

With her smooth talk, she compels him. All at once, he follows her as an ox goes to the slaughter. A bit of attention, a bit of fluttering of the eyes can be very hard for a young man to resist.

Easily seduced. The excitement of the moment overrules any objective thought about what's going to take place. He's led by his emotions. The simple are led by what they see and taste, the pleasure they can receive right now.

[18:28] The simple person you see is vulnerable, undisciplined, rather than being deliberately wicked. They're just easily led. They don't engage the brain.

But although the gullible are not said to be wicked or godless, their gullibility is not without danger for themselves or for their friends.

You see, until the simple repent, they are grouped with the fools, with the mockers. We saw that in our passage earlier.

They're often mentioned in the same breath, and they face the same fate, unless they repent and turn around and start to follow the Lord. The simple need to learn prudence and wisdom.

So what's a simple person like? The uncritical, undiscerning, undisciplined, quick to believe, slow to see, too ready to give into temptation.

[19:31] Now, you may think, I've known people like that. How do you respond respond? What if you think somebody around you is probably in that category?

How do we respond to the simple? How do you help someone who cannot see the obvious things in front of them? Well, I think three things to highlight in terms of how we interact with someone who might be simple, might be naive.

Patience, prudence, and protection. Sometimes the answer is patience. don't give up on them. It may be the person you're dealing with, they're just young.

They need direction. They need to heed wisdom. And so, sometimes a bit of patience is what's required. I look back on things I said and did in my early twenties, which is a long time ago now, and I think back and I'm embarrassed.

What was I thinking? I was a fool. I was naive. But I was so grateful to those older and wiser saints around me who were patient, who allowed me to make mistakes, to learn the hard lessons of life.

[20:48] They didn't just jump in and do it for me. It's not to say that we just leave them alone and hope for the best. No, the path that the simple finds themselves on is a dangerous path. And until they repent, they are grouped with, as I said, the fools and the mockers.

So part of the response is to gently and clearly instruct them in the lack of wisdom and to help them see the reality of their naive ways. And this can be hard because sometimes the simple are slow to learn.

Sometimes verbally warning them about a scoffer is not enough. They need to see the scoffer being dealt with, struck, to get the message.

So it can take time and persistence to help the simple see the error of their ways. But they need to be told very clearly, you do need to repent. The way you're going is not wise.

You need to repent and find wisdom. So part of the answer is patience. Another part of the answer is prudence. Don't be naive yourself.

[21 : 58] If you're beginning to come to the realization that one of your associates is what Proverbs would call simple or naive, then you probably need to think carefully about the degree to which you involve yourselves with them.

Proverbs 12, 26 would urge us to choose our friends carefully. Friendships are not neutral.

Friendships are powerful and they will lead us in the path of wisdom or down the path of folly.

C.S. Lewis said that friendship can be a school of virtue but also a school of vice. And so it would be foolish therefore to make a simple person your closest friend.

because you may well just get sucked in. But you're not just to walk away either. Your simple friend needs guidance.

They are winnable to the ways of wisdom. We see that in chapter 9 where we see Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly crying out to those who pass by. They cry out both of them to the simple. Whoever is simple let them turn in here cries Lady Wisdom.

[23 : 09] But Lady Folly has the same cry. Whoever is simple turn in here. The implication is the simple is able to respond to either. They're winnable. And so you may need to discern when to speak up and what to say so as to help your simple friends see the reality of a particular situation and choose wisdom's way.

Help them see the reality of that friendship. Help them see the reality of that relationship. Help them to see the reality of that betting habit or whatever it might be. But take care lest you get caught up in it.

Prudence is required. Wisdom is required. When do you jump in and say something? When do you stand back and not engage? We need wisdom don't we? That's the second thing prudence.

But thirdly protection. don't leave the simple vulnerable. Within the church we do need to look out for those who are simple to wise protect them from foolish influences given that they are according to proverbs weak wills easily seduced.

sometimes a church needs to take action in order to care for such simple ones. The apostle Paul in Romans says this I appeal to you brothers to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you've been taught.

[24 : 46] Avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Jesus but their own appetites and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

See what Paul's saying? For the sake of the naive amongst you you need to deal sometimes with those who cause divisions who create obstacles contrary to the doctrine we've been taught.

Sometimes dealing with the vice of people is necessary in order to protect those who are naive or simple in the church. The simple because of what we've seen about them they can be easily recruited to the sinister agenda of some within the professing church because well those people come with winks and words they're persuasive they come with much flattery and so the simple's taken in.

We can often be surprised at the ability of blatantly divisive people like that to win folk to their cause. Can't you see them for who they really are you think? Well no the simple can't.

And so for that reason sometimes it's necessary for a church to have to make clear that some people, those who cause division, who create obstacles, they've got to be avoided.

[26 : 06] They need to be made clear for the sake of the naive and especially so in the case of scoffers. We'll see that next week. Scoffers can be especially influential with the simple.

That's at the extreme end. It may be that a simple person needs to be helped out of a particular situation they found themselves in. They maybe have got embedded within a social group that's profoundly unhelpful.

They perhaps have come to the realization themselves that this is not a healthy group of friends I'm living with. How can you help extricate them from that situation? Perhaps they need a room in your house for a few weeks just to escape, to reset, to find somewhere else to live.

They need geographic distance from the people they've been associating with perhaps. The simple are to some degree out of touch with reality. They're gullible and so they need at various times and various ways and to different degrees they need to be treated with patience, prudence, and protection.

But there's a danger with a sermon like this. You can perhaps find yourself sitting here a little smugly and you're thankful that so and so is here to hear this.

[27 : 29] I'm so glad that Joe Bloggs over there is here to hear this because they are simple, they've got to hear this, I'm so glad they're here. And yes, it's good to listen to a sermon with one ear listening for how others might hear it, how it applies to other people, but we've got two ears and the other one needs to be ready to listen for ourselves.

Perhaps before we look across the room it's good to look in the mirror. What if you're the simple one? What if I'm the simple one?

The problem is that none of us naturally sees ourselves as clearly as we think we do. The great danger of the simple person is they don't know their simple. They can't see reality.

And that is precisely why we need God's revelation. We need someone to tell us the truth about God, about the world, about ourselves. And perhaps you're realizing actually I'm the one who's simple, I've been gullible, I've been naive.

It can be quite a sobering realization can't it? It's perhaps a painful realization. But it's not as straightforward as giving yourself the label simple. It's perhaps not the case that in every area of life we're guilty of being gullible or naive.

[28 : 51] We might be very diligent and savvy in some aspects of life but utterly naive in others. Perhaps we're all in danger of slipping into simple, naive ways because, well, it's sometimes tempting to stick one's head in the sand, to pretend that things are other than they really are.

We adopt simple ways because we think it'll make life easier. The dripping tap under the kitchen sink, if I leave it, it will just fix itself. I'm guilty of that.

Let's just take out another credit card, let's transfer the debts onto the new one and let's forget about it for 12 months. It'll sort itself out. I really don't want to deal with that bad behavior.

It's going to resolve itself. Is it possible that we are guilty of being willingly naive, turning a blind eye and therefore not having to deal with difficult things?

Perhaps just hope the problem will go away? Maybe it's not an inability to see but a refusal to see. Part of the answer, if we realize we are guilty of being gullible and naive, is we need to learn to count the costs.

[30 : 05] We need to learn the wisdom of discretion and prudence. It's doing the hard work of understanding a difficult thing, contending with reality. That's often hard, isn't it? To not be naive.

Sometimes that's a choice. Hear the words of Proverbs 8, which says, O simple ones, learn prudence. O fools, learn sense.

So we've got to learn prudence. To be prudent means to be able to grasp the reality of situations, to understand people, to see problems properly and then work out how are we going to deal with this? What's the solution? But there is a more serious sense of being simple than these sort of isolated incidents. Maybe it's more than just demonstrating a simple trait now and then.

Would the writer of Proverbs, if they observed your life in its totality, would they place you perhaps in the category of simple in the book of Proverbs?

[31 : 09] Might they have you in mind as they write this, if they were to look at your life? The relationships you invest in, the romantic entanglements, the financial troubles, whatever it is.

And you see, the thing is, being simple is a dangerous place to be. It's not a neutral place to be in. It is a way of life that needs to be repented of. And if that's you, well, there is hope.

Listen to Psalm 119. The Lord preserves the simple. When I was brought low, he saved me. You see, our simplicity is not something we can ultimately rescue ourselves from.

We can't pull ourselves out. We need to recognize our simple ways, confess them and repent of them. And we can know that as we cry out to God for mercy, for our gullibility, for our naivety, our foolishness, of trusting our own instincts rather than listening to his instructions, as we cry out, we know that he does hear us.

He does rescue us. He preserves us. He saves us. And if we're all honest, then we know that at one time or another, all of us were firmly in the simple category.

[32 : 31] By nature, we are utterly limited. By nature, we are sinners. We know so little. We understand so little. We need the light of God's revelation to show us the folly of our ways and so turn from a simple understanding of ourselves and the world and of God himself and to turn to him and find salvation in him.

because outside of Christ, all of us are simple. And in the end, there are only ever two options. The way of wisdom, which is the way of Christ, or the way of folly.

Which way will you go? Turn with me to chapter 9 as we close. And I'll read you some words here from chapter 9.

And there are two women, Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. Both are calling out, appealing for folk to come into their homes.

Chapter 9, verse 1. Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beast. She has mixed her wine.

[33 : 42] She has also set her table. She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town whoever is simple. Let him turn in here. To him who lacks sense, she says, come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight. Verse 13. The woman, folly, is loud. She is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house. She takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. And to him who lacks sense, she says, stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.

But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. The same call to the simple.

[34 : 50] Whoever is simple, turn in here. And that call is made to you. But choose carefully.

To heed lady wisdom, verse 6. To leave your simple ways and live. But to heed lady folly, where does that lead?

Look at verse 18. Death. He does not know that the dead are there. There are only, in the end, two ways.

It's not a question of whether, but which. It's not a question of whether you're going to choose wisdom or folly. It's which one you're going to choose. Which path will you go down?

Which call will you heed, O simple one? Proverbs 9 makes it very clear. Choose life. Choose Christ. Choose life.

[35 : 47] Reject there. Are you wise? Or are you simple? Have you submitted yourself to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour?

That is the way of wisdom. To refuse to do so is to remain. Simple. Will you go that way? With yourself on the throne.

A simple life. Make your choice. Proverbs would say choose life. Choose wisdom. Choose Christ. Let me pray.

And then we're going to sing before we come to the Lord's table. Amen. Father, thank you for your word which brings such clarity.

Which brings reality. Because so often we fail to see what is right in front of us. We cannot see reality. We need your word to show us the way of truth and life and wisdom.

[37 : 13] And so forgive us for our simple ways. Forgive us for our naivety, our gullibility. Forgive us in all the small things in life. but also in the most important.

The question of how, of do we have you on the throne in our lives? Have we repented and turned to you as Lord and Savior? That is the true way to reject simplicity.

So Father, help us, each of us, to respond to your words with the obedience of faith and not the simplicity of rejection.

So help us to respond in faith, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.