



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers
(*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 24-30)

Suggested Article:

📖 Body Worship
(*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 66-69)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers

In three characters delineated in Proverbs we can see an ancient account of the descent into the folly of pornography in our times. Yet biblical wisdom offers hope for redemption, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further.

Prayer†

My soul's desire is to see the face of God,
and to rest in his house.
My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures,
and to learn the ways of God.
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness,
and to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to imitate my King,
and to sing his praises always.
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires,
and you alone can satisfy those desires. Amen.

Scripture Readings: Proverbs 9:1-6, 9-10, and 13-18

Reflection

Wisdom is personified in Proverbs 9 as the hostess of a delicious banquet of home-baked bread and the finest wine. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom," teach the ancient Israelite sages, "and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." Folly is the very opposite of this godly wisdom which the ancient teachers commend. She is a lazy pretender, offering us only "stolen" water and bread. A great many proverbs warn of the allure and threat of folly, for it is far more devastating than mere childishness or silliness. "Folly," in the biblical wisdom tradition, is one name for all that destroys life.

Folly appears in many forms in Proverbs, including slander (10:18), drunkenness and gluttony (23:20), laziness (26:15), and greed for riches (28:22, 25). Pornography is a contemporary form of folly, Wilson suggests, that runs rampant in our culture.

Proverbs often makes its teaching vivid and concrete through the use of characters. In the three characters of the simple, the fool, and the mocker, we see an ancient accounting of a person's descent into folly:

- ▶ The *simple* lack sense (7:7), are naïve (14:15), and do not perceive the consequences of their actions (22:3). The simple are not wicked and have not rejected the way of wisdom, but their lack of judgment, if not corrected, will lead them into waywardness and eventually destruction (1:32).
- ▶ The *fool* delights in ignorance (1:7, 22), scorns the advice of others (15:5; 23:9), trusts his own insight (18:2; 28:26), and lacks self-control (14:16). The fool is seduced by folly, and thus develops a taste for the counterfeit pleasures of the way of death. The fool cultivates ignorance and plans evil.
- ▶ The *mocker* (NIV), or scoffer (NRSV), embraces folly as a pattern for living. Mockers delight in pride and arrogance



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(21:24) and praise the folly of others. They are committed to drawing others into the way of death, all the time mocking those who bear witness to wisdom, the way of life (9:7-8).

"This, then, is the history of sin as it is embodied in the way of folly," summarizes Wilson. "The simple one, who has a bent toward folly, follows that natural bent. He becomes a fool whose heart is set on folly, whose purpose and energy is directed toward folly. The fool becomes the mocker who calls what is good, 'evil,' and what is evil, he calls 'good.' He perceives death as life and mocks those in the way of wisdom as those who don't know how to live."

Do we not see this same pattern of descent into the folly of pornography today? A simple one naïvely "browses" the internet or "surfs" late night cable channels to see what's "out there." A fool downloads images onto a computer or stashes pornographic magazines in the nightstand. Then a mocker promotes these deadly pleasures as "the way to enjoy life."

Pornography's spiritually deadly folly permeates our culture in other subtle ways. The Dardens suggest that when men and women, husbands and wives, and even parents of teenage girls endorse cosmetic silicone breast implants, they succumb to its folly. They voluntarily mutilate the female body in order to attain an idealized, narrowed version of feminine beauty.

Proverbs holds hope of redemption from Folly's deadly traps for the simple, since teachers can direct them toward the path of life. It holds little hope for the fool, and even less for the mocker, for they have closed their ears to instruction. However, even fools and mockers can be "born again," not in the facile sense of popular culture, but in the death-denying, life-giving power of the incarnate wisdom of God.

Study Questions

1. How are Wisdom and Folly personified in Proverbs 9? How are their competing allures portrayed?
2. "How do the simple learn wisdom?" Wilson wonders (p. 30). Where does learning wisdom begin? What role do parents and elders play in this educational process?
3. "We have fallen prey to a cult that worships a false idol," the Dardens write. "The female breast is a wonderful thing. The worship of it in the popular culture is idolatry" (*The Pornographic Culture*, p. 67). Does this artificial sense of female beauty and culturally-mandated desirability reflect our culture's descent into the folly of pornography? How can we reorient our attitudes about beauty and desirability?
4. What might be a simple (or naïve) person's attitude toward cosmetic silicone breast implants? How might fools respond? Or mockers?

Departing Hymn: "My Jesus, I Love Thee" (Verses 1, 2, 4)

† Robert van de Weyer, *Celtic Prayers*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 38. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To contrast the ways of Wisdom and Folly in the biblical wisdom tradition.
2. To understand the simple, the fool, and the mocker as key stages in the descent into folly.
3. To identify the hope we share for avoiding the snares of folly.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Pornographic Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a story

Retell the story in Proverbs 7:6-20 in your own words. Incorporate locations or events that help the group imagine this occurring in their city. Conclude with a question: "How distant is this ancient story from our time and place, from internet sex chat rooms or ads for 'adult' clubs?"

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close this time of prayer by asking members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask three members to read Proverbs 9:1-6, 9-10, and 13-18 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Folly pretends to offer a satisfying meal, though she has only stolen bread and water in the house. The real meal of home-baked bread and fine wine is in the house of Wisdom. Our deepest desires will be satisfied at Wisdom's banquet. "Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires," says the prayer, "and you alone can satisfy those desires." If time permits, members may want to read aloud the additional proverbs about folly. They reinforce her 'pretender' status, because she always leaves us unsatisfied with our lives and desiring more.

The ancient Israelite sages realized that how we respond to the allure of folly depends, in part, on our character. Though they were not social scientists, they observed three patterns of response to folly and to instruction, in the simple, the fool, and the mocker. These characters are distinguished by (a) how much they know about themselves and the world, and (b) how much they care about wisdom. Wilson sees them as three stages of descent into folly. The simple person does not understand fully the path he's tempted to follow; hence, he can be corrected by wise instruction from a person whom he trusts. The fool's understanding has been darkened and his desires are changing, for he is beginning to enjoy his ignorance. Ironically, the fool is losing self-control precisely because he trusts his own insight over all others' perspectives; no one can teach him. The mocker is completely turned around in his confusion and misshapen desires; he rebels against wisdom. Indeed, he is a recruiter for folly, tempting others to

their destruction. If time permits, members may study the verses delineating each of these character patterns.

This ancient observation of folly's descent remains quite contemporary. This pattern illuminates people's varying responses to the folly of pornography.

Cosmetic breast implants are a related symptom of our foolish ways. How can we explain the distorted desires that drive the clients who seek these products in order to become desirable, or the surgeons who provide what they seek? The Dardens say the female breast has become a focus of idolatry, or body worship. Are there other industries that reflect our 'body worship'? The ancient sages' delineation of simple, foolish, and mocking responses may help us sort through the varying, twisted motivations that the Dardens describe.

Study Questions

1. Wisdom is a diligent and hard working hostess (1-2). Folly is loud, but ignorant (13); she lazily sits at the door to her house, while Wisdom busily prepares her home for guests. Both call the simple to "turn in" to their houses (4, 16). Wisdom offers a real, delicious public banquet of bread and wine (5); Folly extends no such hospitalities, providing only stolen water and bread to be consumed in secret (17). The key difference is that Lady Wisdom exhorts her guests toward maturity and the way of life and insight (6) while Lady Folly deceives her guests into enjoying pleasures that lead only to death (18).
2. Learning wisdom begins with "the fear the LORD," or recognizing God as our Creator who calls us to a banquet filled with love and worship. "The fear of the LORD is glory and exultation, and gladness and a crown of rejoicing," the wisdom book of Sirach begins. "The fear of the LORD delights the heart, and gives gladness and joy and long life" (1:11-12). The simple persons' problem is naïveté and inability to anticipate the consequences of their actions; they do not know where to find true joy. Parents, teachers, and other adults with godly wisdom can warn the simple about how their actions shape themselves and their relationships with other people and God. The fools and mockers have no such hope, for they ignore and belittle their would-be instructors. Hope for the fools and mockers, Wilson says, rests largely with the Spirit of God transforming their deformed hearts.
3. One of pornography's many follies is the marketing, to men and women, of a superficial concept of beauty. Pornography proposes that our bodies are primarily for pleasing sexual and voyeuristic appetites. Let 's not forget that terrific minds, wonderful personalities, and delightful senses of humor, not just bodies, are part of what makes human beings completely beautiful. The Dardens remind us that God created the whole person and declared all creation good. Ask members to name ways that congregations can encourage the valuing of minds, personalities, senses of humor, desires for relationship, and all the other beautiful parts of human beings.
4. Members might review "Body Worship" for examples of each attitude, or construct their own examples. The simple are naïve and do not perceive the consequences of their actions; examples of naïve attitudes might be men commenting admiringly on the size of a woman's breasts or laughing at jokes about breast size, and parents uncritically purchasing fanciful toys like Barbie for their daughters. Husbands who pressure their wives into getting breast implants, women who desire to 'enhance' their bust size, and parents who consent to their teenage daughter's requests for cosmetic surgery all exhibit foolish attitudes; they do not resist social pressures, ignorantly demean God's good creation, and trust their own insight into what makes women beautiful. The cosmetic surgeon that built a giant swimming pool in the shape of a breast, with a Jacuzzi for the nipple, delights in his arrogance and the folly of others; hence, he surely is the mocker.

Departing Hymn

The familiar hymn "My Jesus, I Love Thee" is reprinted on p. 55 of *The Pornographic Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.