A FAITHFUL READER OF OUR LITTLE TOTT LETTER and supporter of our print outreach recently wrote, "If you would, please consider addressing the various uses of 'fool' in Scripture (OT and NT). Could you explain Matthew 5:22 in light of several Proverbs and Psalms where people are called fools? Are we not allowed to call people such as atheists andagnostics fools?"

That request intrigued me because it immediately flies in the face of our post-modern culture. If everything, especially truth, is relative, who can say anyone is "a person lacking in judgment or prudence," as Webster defines "fool"? Think about it. While most people would think it foolish to jump off a tall building, relativism demands that we conclude—that is, if a real conclusion about anything can actually be drawn—"That decision was right and wise for that person."

If a real conclusion about anything can actually be drawn—that is, "That decision was right and wise for that person."—while most people would think it foolish to jump off a tall building, relativism demands that we conclude—that is, if a real conclusion about anything can actually be drawn—that is, "That decision was right and wise for that person."

Let us, therefore, delve into this question both exegetically and practically. Before we address the "fool," however, I believe it is important to first understand the antithesis.¹

Understanding Wisdom and Discernment

The word most often translated "wisdom" in the OT is the Hebrew chokmāh, which refers to "a person's ability to make the right choices at the opportune times." The Greek equivalents of chokmāh in the Septuagint are: sophos or sophia ("clever, skillful, experienced," e.g., Eph. 1:8, 17; 3:10; James 1:5), phronimos or phronesis ("sensible, thoughtful, prudent, wise," e.g., Eph. 1:8; 1 Cor. 4:10), and suniemi or sunetos ("intelligent, sagacious, prudent, wise," e.g., Eph. 5:17; 1 Tim. 1:17). All these demonstrate the true depth of chokmāh.

The ability to make the right choices at the opportune times, however, is only half the issue. How and where do we get this? To get a proper biblical understanding of wisdom, it's crucial to go back in history. The subject of wisdom was a chief concern in the ancient Near East. To the Mesopotamians and Sumerians, it involved human experiences, character, and counsel regarding practical advice. To the Egyptians, it involved the concept of ma'at (truth, intelligence, justice), which brought order to the whole universe. To the Greek mind, knowledge itself was virtue. According to Plato, a person could live the good life if he loved wisdom and knowledge. Unlike those, however, that leave the One, True God out of the equation, wisdom in the OT is distinct in that it reveals a holy and just God who demands that men live holy lives according to His character and standards. While chokmāh at times refers to ordinary intelligence and skill (Ex. 35:35; Dan. 1:4), divine and moral wisdom is still in view.²

Biblically, then, wisdom is not found in experience but in revelation; the only way we can have wisdom is if it is revealed to us. I like Dr. Roy Zuck's definition: "Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one's relationships and responsibilities... observing and following the Creator's principles of order in the moral universe."³ In that definition you find most of the important elements of biblical wisdom. Where do we find wisdom? We find it in what the Creator says, which in turn is found in Scripture alone.

True wisdom, then, begins with a right relationship with God. Unless we start with God as our presupposition, we will fail. Unless we start with God, we will have no wisdom. As Solomon declares, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom [chokmāh] and instruction." The wise person believes there is a God: "The fool [the professed atheist] hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 53:1). The wise person believes that God is the Creator and Ruler of all things, and he believes that God has put within His Creation a divine order that, if obeyed, leads ultimately to blessing. Wise people also assert that there is a Moral Law operating in this world, a principle of divine justice that makes sure that eventually the wicked are judged and the righteous are rewarded. Biblical wisdom has no relationship to a person's IQ or education, because it is a matter of moral and spiritual understanding. It has to do with character and values; it means looking at the world through the grid of God's Truth, evaluating, discerning, and deciding everything according to the absolutes of God's Word.

Another Hebrew word that is essential to understand here is biyn, which is translated several ways in our AV Bible, including (and most often) "understand" (62) and understanding (32). Several other translations (e.g., consider, perceive, discern) reflect the fact that biyn, which with its derivatives appears 247 times, has a wide range of meanings, also including: "to discern, perceive, observe, understand, pay attention, be intelligent, and be discreet."

Biyn is, therefore, much more than just gathering knowl-
edge. It’s about understanding that knowledge. As was true of Daniel, for example, a person might be able to hear words, but not understand them (Dan. 12:8). As vital as knowledge is, by itself it is virtually worthless. Biyn, therefore, speaks of how we use the knowledge we acquire. In Psalm 119:27, David prays, “Make me to understand the way of thy precepts: so shall I talk of thy wondrous works,” and again in verse 34, “Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart,” and still again in verse 73, “give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments” (see also v. 100). David didn’t want just knowledge but to know why that knowledge was important, the way that knowledge applied to the real world, and even the consequences that knowledge would have on everything else.

That is what is so desperately needed today. A consistent Christian life is absolutely impossible without constant learning and a growing understanding of what that knowledge will demand in one’s Christian walk. And from where does such understanding come? David again answers, “Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false commandment” (Ps. 119:104). Understanding is not a product of rationalism or empiricism. It is comes only from God (Dan. 2:21) and only by diligent seeking (Prov. 2:4–5).

One Hebrew authority digs to the true depth of biyn by noting: “The background idea of the verb is to ‘discern,’ and this lies behind the [derivatives, such as] . . . the preposition bbn ‘between.’ The combination of these words, ‘discern between,’ is used in 1 Kings 3:9, ‘That I may discern between good and evil.’ Biyn includes the concept of distinction that leads to understanding.”

In simpler terms, the key idea in biyn is “to discern, to distinguish between.” From where does understanding come? From discernment. First Kings 3:9 is, indeed, pivotal. If you ask most Christians, “What did Solomon ask God for?” most will answer immediately, “He asked God for wisdom,” but that is not precise. He did not ask God for wisdom (chokmā), rather he asked God for discernment. Our English word comes from the Latin discernere (dis, “apart,” and cernere, “to sift”), and Scripture repeatedly emphasizes this principle. We are to separate, sift through, and distinguish between in order to see and understand.

Catastrophically, however, discernment has all but vanished. Many Christians are tolerant of, or even embrace, false teaching, such as: mysticism, prosperity teaching, seeker-sensitive church ministry, user-friendliness, the “emerging church” movement, unity with Islam, and the list goes on. “The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to [or discerns, biyn] his going” (Prov. 14:15).

What was the responsibility of the OT priests? To “teach [God’s] people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean” (Ezek. 44:23). That is likewise the responsibility of pastors today (Acts 20:28–31; Eph. 4:11–14).

So what does discernment mean? There is only a single principle: What does the Word of God say? It doesn’t matter if some new idea or teaching “sounds good,” but whether it’s right according to Scripture. At the very heart of the Reformation was the concept of sola scriptura (“Scripture Alone”), which is to dictate all we believe and practice—not church tradition, human opinion, pragmatism, or anything else.

As Psalm 119:169 again pleads, “Give me understanding [discernment, biyn] according to thy word.” While David had very little Scripture at his disposal and so cried for discernment, many today don’t even care about discernment even though they have God’s completed revelation in their hands.5

**Old Testament Use of “Fool”**

The opposite of those who are wise, understanding, and discerning is the fool, about whom the Bible has much to say. There are some 160 references to the fool (or “fools” and “foolish”) in Scripture (AV), most of which are in the Old Testament (only 33 in the New). We actually see three “levels” of the fool in the Old Testament.

First, there is the Hebrew ‘ewiyl, which is derived, some scholars think, from yā’al (“to be foolish”), while others think it comes from an Arabic word meaning ‘be thick,’ and therefore ‘thick-brained’ or ‘stupid.’6 Whichever is correct, ‘ewiyl seems to be the first level of foolish behavior. This type of fool is one who seeks controversy and argument (Prov. 20:3), despises instruction because of perceived self-sufficiency (1:7; 12:15), and is basically immoral (7:21, 22; 14:9). So complete is this fool’s insouciance, in fact, that it is a waste of time to even speak to him: “The instruction of fools is folly” (16:22). Even if you ground him in a mortar with a pestle, it would do no good (27:22). What is this fool’s end? He “shall fall” (10:8, lābāt, “torn down, ruined”). Note some other traits of ‘ewiyl in the following verses: Proverbs 12:15; 14:3, 9; 15:5; we see elements of both hedonism and relativism.

Second, the next level of fool is kesiyil, which appears some 70 times, more than twice as often as ‘ewiyl. It comes from the root kāsal, which appears only in Jeremiah 10:8 in reference to idol worshippers. The associated Arabic word gives a picture of sluggishness. Here then is the dull, obstinate fellow who, even if you put truth right in front of his eyes, will not see it (Prov. 17:24). He simply cannot (and would not even if he could) see what is right. And, like ‘ewiyl, it is pointless to speak to this fool (23:9).

This fool is vividly contrasted in Proverbs 1:22: “How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and fools hate knowledge?” While the “simple” man is naïve about what is true, and while the “scorner” mocks truth as unknowable or relative, this fool (a type of relativist) obstinately and irrationally refuses truth, adamantly rejecting true knowledge, which is not only the knowledge of God but any knowledge that comes from God. Again, what is this fool’s end? He will be shamed and dishonored (3:35) and ultimately destroyed (18:7).

How does the fool encourage the believer? We are reminded that while the fool despises wisdom and instruction, we know that it is God who is the beginning of everything (Prov. 1:7). (Note a few of the other traits of kesiyil: Prov. 14:7, 8; 15:7; 26:11; 29:11.)

Third, one other word is the third level of foolish behavior, the ultimate, consummate fool. We could call the Hebrew nābīl “the worst of both worlds,” for it not only includes the characteristics of both ‘ewiyl and kesiyil, but adds the idea of an arrogant bore,” a totally insensitive, immoral, and ungracious person. He speaks well of nothing (Prov. 17:7), is a disgrace to all that is good (Ps. 74:22), and his mind is closed.
So closed is this fool’s mind, in fact, that one verse sums him up in total: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good” (Ps. 14:1). Here is the professing atheist. Even though all Creation loudly proclaims not only God’s existence, but also His eternal, sovereign power and even His Godhead, that is, His glorious character and attributes (Rom. 1:20), this depraved, obstinate wretch shakes his fist and says, “There is no God.”

What does such rejection of God create? First, total corruption. “Corrupt” is shāché, the same word used four times in reference to the state of the earth before the Flood (Gen. 6:11, 12, 17), where “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5). Second, such rejection of God brings abominable works. “Abominable” (τα ἀβαστῶν) speaks of abhorrent, repulsive things, such as “whoredoms” (Ezek. 16:25) and idol worship (1 Kings 21:26). Third, such rejection of God results in the absence of any good whatsoever, man’s total depravity in thought, inclination, motive, and desire (Rom. 1:21–32; Eph. 2:1–3).

Is there any better example of this fool than the evolutionist? The idea that the universe made itself over billions of years is irrational, irresponsible, and irreconcilable. What are the results of such obstinacy? When existence is reduced to “survival of the fittest,” life becomes cheap and the results are such things as the Jewish Holocaust, abortion, school violence, and the general disintegration of society.

We should also note that even Israel as a nation becomes nāḇāl (Deut. 32:21), which serves as a solemn warning to nations today. (Note a few other traits of nāḇāl: Job 30:8; Ps. 74:18; Is. 32:6.)

Finally, like ‘ewiyāl and kēsiyāl, what is this fool’s end? Like Abner, his death is one of dishonor, discredit, and debasement (2 Sam. 3:33). Let us proclaim at full volume, “Let God be true, but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4).

New Testament Use of “Fool”

Again, the OT says more about the fool than the NT, but the latter is no less clear. One Greek word for this is aphrōn. The root phrēn is interesting. As Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates writes, it literally referred to “the diaphragm, that which curbs or restrains” and figuratively spoke of the “seat of all mental and emotional activity.” He goes on to explain: “It was the diaphragm which determined the strength of the breath and hence also the human spirit and its emotions. It precisely refers to the ability not only to think, but also to control one’s thoughts and attitudes. It is the heart as the seat of passions as well as the mind as the seat of mental faculties.”

When the prefix α (the “alpha-negative,” 1) is added to a word, however, it makes it the exact opposite (e.g., English amoral. So with the “alpha-negative,” aphrōn means the exact opposite. In all the other 10 occurrences of aphrōn, it is transliterated “fool,” “fools,” or “foolish.”

A fool, then, is a person who not only does not think correctly, but also cannot control the thoughts and attitudes he does have. He not only doesn’t think the right things, but when he does think, that’s not right either. Joseph Thayer, 19th-century Greek scholar, defines it this way: “Without reason . . . senseless, foolish, stupid, without reflection or intelligence, acting rashly.” In Luke 11:40, the Lord Jesus calls the Pharisees (the religionists) “fools” because they thought doing something external would satisfy God. Nothing is more foolish than thinking that a Holy God could be satisfied by any works a man could do. Likewise, He called the rich farmer (a materialist) a fool in Luke 12:20 because he thought wealth and possessions were all he needed. That is, indeed, the height of folly.

Another Greek word translated fool (or “foolish”) is anoētōs. The classic example of the foolish Christian (the legalist) appears in Galatians 3:1 and 3, where Paul writes, “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth. . . . Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?”

Anoētōs is another “alpha-negative.” The root nous means “mind, intellect, understanding, reason, and thought,” which is then made the opposite by the prefix α. The Judaizers had infiltrated the church and were undermining the very core of Christianity, namely, justification by faith alone, teaching that to be Christians, Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes and obey the Mosaic Law. Appalled that the Galatians would tolerate, much less embrace, such heresy, Paul called them people without understanding, reason, and thought, people who had abandoned the very truth they had been taught.

That is just as true today as then. With the growing denial of justification by faith alone, the continuing onslaught against the true Gospel message, and the growing challenge to biblical ministry, there are countless “foolish” professing Christian teachers and followers. That type of fool can be described in several ways.

First, the fool (in this case the relativist) is concerned about the abstract instead of the absolute. For many today, facts get in the way of unity. After all, it is argued, “Doctrine divides: love unites.” Such an idea is the height of folly because nothing, then, is absolute, nothing is sure.

Second, the fool (in this case the hedonist) is concerned about wants instead of the Word. Many churches being built today, even so-called evangelical ones, are not being founded upon a ministry of the Word of God, rather upon what people want, such as entertainment and every appealing program imaginable. But Scripture, of course, teaches none of that.

Third, the fool (in this case the mystic) is concerned about transient feelings instead of true fact. Tragically, feelings drive many people’s belief systems; facts aren’t the issue, faith in what God says in His Word is not the issue, but rather how it makes them feel is the issue. It’s not the intellect that rules, but rather it’s an impulse that rules. There’s great zeal, but nothing real. This has even kicked open the door to the growing frequency of mysticism, which teaches finding God through visions and revelations.

What About Matthew 5:22?

We turn now to our “tough text”: I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Is this verse saying that any use of the word “fool” is sinful and could actually lead to condemnation to hell? Obviously not. If that were the case, this statement by our Lord would contradict
every verse we have already cited. So what is our Lord saying?

As always, context is the key to proper interpretation. The context of this verse is Jesus’ discussion with the Pharisees, specifically, a discussion of the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not [murder]” (phoneūō; cf. Ex. 20:13). The Pharisees, of course, quoted the letter of Law, but our Lord went far deeper into the very spirit of the Law. To the Pharisees, the Law was all outward, just simple legalism. But Jesus, as He does several more times in the verses that follow, demonstrates that it is the inward that matters. As He makes clear in verse 20—“except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven”—legalism is not enough.

So, in verse 22, Jesus first says that while the outward action of murder is obviously sin—as it is in most cultures and religions—the inward attitude to do it is also sin in God’s eyes whether one acts on it or not. The first attitude that indicates murderous intent is when one is angry with his brother without a cause. While some insist that all anger is sin, that simply cannot be so. Our Lord Himself was definitely angry on at least two occasions, the two instances of His cleansing the Temple of the moneychangers, one at the beginning of His ministry (Jn. 2:13–16) and one at the end (Matt. 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–46). There are also many examples in Scripture where God was (or is) angry (e.g., 1 Kings 11:9; 2 Kings 17:18; Pss. 7:11; 79:5; cf. Heb. 12:29).

We should also note Paul’s command, “Be ye angry, and sin not” (Eph. 4:26). Paul does not say, “Never get angry,” rather, “In your anger, don’t sin.” In fact, the clause “be ye angry” is a present imperative in the Greek, that is, a command to be continuously angry. That, of course, doesn’t mean we go through life always angry, rather there will be times throughout life that we are to get angry. One Greek word for anger is thumos, “to move impetuously, particularly as the air or wind, a violent motion or passion of the mind.” The idea, then, is anger that arises quickly, and is passionate and temporary. Another word, the one Paul uses here, is orgē, which is more settled than thumos. While thumos is passionate and temporary, orgē indicates “a more enduring state of mind.”

What is Paul saying? Is he telling us that while we shouldn’t explode in anger (v. 31, “wrath” is thumos), we should have a torrent of Fathers; by every known copy of the old Latin; by all the Syriac; by the Coptic, as well as by the Gothic and version. The massive 10-volume Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (edited by Gerhard Kittel) has long been recognized as an authority on Greek exegesis. It comments on this verse:

There is no real witness of the omission of eikē . . . . Origen, followed by Jerome, [the Latin] Vulgate, and Augustine, probably introduced a correction on moral grounds to make all anger reprehensible. Sinaiticus and Vaticanus [the two most revered manuscripts in modern rationalistic textual criticism] are surely dependent on Origen. In the Western and Syrian manuscripts there is unanimous support for eikē, and it is probably genuine. The brilliant 19th-century textual scholar John Burgon, a contemporary of the liberals Westcott and Hort, was even more specific and demonstrated that the manuscript evidence for this word is overwhelming:

[The word eikē] is attested by every uncial copy of the Gospels except Sinaiticus and Vaticanus; by a whole torrent of Fathers; by every known copy of the old Latin; by all the Syriac; by the Coptic, as well as by the Gothic and Armenian versions. . . . There really can be no doubt whatever . . . that eikē was our Savior’s actual word.

In light of the first, the second and third attitudes that indicate murderous intent are easy to understand. Both come from the same causes as the first. To hatefully say Raca (rhaka, transliterated from the Aramaic) is to contemptuously call someone worthless, empty headed, brainless, witless, and stupid. Fool, then, is moros (English “moron”), which is even stronger than rhaka. While rhaka “scorns a man by calling him [worthless and] stupid, moros scorches him concerning his heart and character.”

Flowing from deep hatred, it calls the person a vile wretch. So again, like unrighteous anger, both rhaka and moros are motivated by personal affront, not for godly reasons.

A noteworthy instance of moros appears in 1 Corinthians 1. In verse 31, Paul writes that men mockingly and hatefully call the preaching of Christ “foolishness” (moría). He responds, in effect, “Even what you call foolishness is wiser than your so-
called wisdom. God chose to use what you scornfully call stupidly to confound and shame you” (vv. 25, 27).

**Conclusion**

So, what do we conclude from all this? First, there is to be no self-centered anger, hateful attitude, or scornful speech. Second, however, there can indeed be righteous anger and an acknowledgment of man’s foolishness in the face of God. As we have noted, the relativist is without question a fool, as is the evolutionist, the idolater, the religionist, the materialist, the legalist, the hedonist, and the mystic. The greatest fools of all, of course, are the so-called atheist and agnostic, for they deny the very knowledge God has put within them (Rom. 1:18–28). In fact, in all these cases, in “professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (v. 22). While we must always endeavor to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), we should, indeed, humbly and lovingly point out men’s foolishness so as to “save with fear, pulling them out of the fire” (Jude 23).

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**Notes**

1. The word studies in this article were adapted from the author’s A Word for the Day (AMG Publishers, 2006), 92–92, and A Hebrew Word for the Day (AMG, 2010), 82–87.
4. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Moody), entry #239.
5. For a deeper study of discernment, see TWOT issues 8, 9, and 10, or chapter 6 in the book, Truth on Tough Texts (Sola Scriptura Publications, 2012).
6. TWOT, entry #44
7. TWOT, entry #1011
9. Thayer’s Greek–English Lexicon (public domain), entry #40.
10. Zodhiates, entry #2372.
13. Ibid.
15. Zodhiates, entry #G3474.

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