



Simple-minded or Shrewd, What is the Difference?

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There is a reason why the book of Proverbs was written. In Chapter 1:4 we read “to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning to acquire skill. This verse introduces us to all the proverbs that follow. What is meant by the word “simple”? Proverbs 22:3 helps us understand, “The clever see danger and hide; but the simple go on and suffer for it.” Or we can look at proverbs 23, verses 6-9. “Do not eat the bread of the stingy; do not desire their delicacies; for like a hair in the throat, so are they. ‘Eat and drink,’ they say to you; but they do not mean it. You will vomit up the little you have eaten, and you will waste your pleasant words.”

To be simple is to just do what comes next, to take on what is presented to us without discernment or reflection. A simpleton is a person who goes along with what is happening without stopping to consider the outcome or consequences that will show up later. Since a young person has the pre-frontal cortex of his or her brain still developing and not mature until a female is around 23 or a male around 25 years of age, it is important for them to realize just going with the crowd might well get them in trouble. For before that full maturity of their brain develops, they will lack to some degree the ability to have good judgment. It will be difficult for them to consider what the long-term implications are of the decisions they make. Thus, they will be prone to be simple-minded. It will benefit them greatly if they are taught wisdom and shrewdness.

The Shrewdness of Jesus

We might have some idea what wisdom is. But what is shrewdness? How do we understand that word? There is an element of surprise featured when we think of shrewdness. For me, I need actual stories to help me understand what shrewdness is. One good example of that is what we find in Luke 20:1-5. Here the chief priests, the scribes and the elders came to Jesus thinking they had him dead to rights. They had what they saw as a legitimate question which would put him in his place. Here it is, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it that gave you this authority?” Now we know that God the Father sent Jesus, His Son but that meant there was no person on earth who gave him the authority to speak and do what he spoke and did. So, they understood he had no official



group or person on this earth he could point to. Realizing that, they thought they had him in a trap from which he could not escape. So, what happened?

Instead of answering their question, he found a totally unique way of dealing with their ironclad plan. What does he do? He poses them with a question, saying once they answer his question, then he will answer theirs. Okay, what is his question? “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or what it was of human origin?” This was a surprise question they were not ready for. It was a question which would reveal something about them they did not want exposed. They had not believed that John the Baptist was someone sent from God, but the average Jew did believe in John and so were baptized by him. Instead of answering Jesus directly, these questioners huddle to discuss how they were going to answer Jesus’ question. Suddenly, they are the ones squirming.

How they were to answer Jesus was a challenge to them. If they said John’s baptism was from God, Jesus would come back and say why then did not you believe him. If they said John was not sent from God, the people would stone them for they believed John was a messenger of God. So, these original questioners faced a dilemma. They finally decided to tell Jesus they were not going to answer his question for they did not know where John came from. At that point Jesus ends the conversation by saying, “If you will not answer my question, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” Is this not an example of what being shrewd looks like? Jesus caught them off guard. Their plan was to undermine Jesus’ credibility. But he turned the tables on them and exposed their lack of credibility and authority. Jesus shrewdly realized how his questioners wanted to hide the fact of what their unbelieving response was to John the Baptist. They wanted people to overlook their stubborn outlook. In other words, Jesus hit a sore spot. They thought they could get by with their unbelief.

The Shrewdness of the Prophet Micaiah

The best way to understand shrewdness is with examples. So, here is another Bible story. In the book of I Kings, chapter 22, we meet up with a little-known prophet named Micaiah. His king, evil Ahab, wanted in the worst way to go fight and take back a town from the King of Aram. Four hundred prophets tell King Ahab to go fight and he will surely succeed. But King Jehoshaphat is there. He had come north from the southern kingdom of Judah. He asks if there is not another prophet from whom to inquire. Ahab says there actually is one, but he never likes what he says. Nevertheless, he does send for his nemesis prophet, Micaiah. The person bringing Micaiah to King Ahab tells Micaiah what is going to be asked of him. He tells Micaiah to just go along with the other prophets spoke. Micaiah tells him, “As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak.” Micaiah comes in before King Ahab, Ahab asks him directly, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-Gilead to battle or shall we refrain?” At this point Micaiah answers shrewdly, “Go and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hands of the king.” It is just what the king wants to hear.

But King Ahab catches something in the way Micaiah is making it too easy for him. It is not like Micaiah. So, Ahab retorts, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?” When we hear King Ahab say this, it becomes clear that Micaiah’s habit of pronouncing something to King Ahab has usually been in a kind of playful guessing game sort of way. Instead of



coming down hard on King Ahab in a demanding kind of attitude, Micaiah has an approach which gets Ahab to listen despite his desire to do whatever he pleases on his own terms. At first Micaiah is taking the simpleton's approach. Just let King Ahab do what he wants to do. But King Ahab knows Micaiah. He knows he is not ready to join the crowd of prophets and simply conform to their desire to please the king and look good in the process. Micaiah is not a simple man. He is not a "Yes man". Surely, not in the face of evil, greed, and lust. And neither is the God he represents.

We now find King Ahab has been set up to really hear what Micaiah has to say. Micaiah speaks in pictures, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the Lord said, "They have no master; let each one go home in peace." Hearing this King Ahab turns to King Jehoshaphat says, "Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favorable about me, but only disaster?"

The hard message Micaiah is to deliver can now say in cutting words, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the hosts of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?' Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord saying, 'I will entice him,' 'How?' the Lord asked him. He replied, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' Then the Lord said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.' So, you see, the Lord put a lying spirit in the mouth of all your prophets; the Lord has decreed disaster for you?"

With shrewdness, Micaiah has delivered his hard-hitting message. He found a way to get it said. One of the prophets then slaps him for saying what he did. King Ahab has Micaiah put in prison. King Ahab thinks Micaiah's words warning Ahab of his imminent death will not affect him. He thinks he is clever enough to avoid this death sentence. Therefore, he goes into the battle disguising himself so the enemy will not know he is the king. Despite his trickery a random arrow hits him and by sunset he dies. Micaiah's words have proved to be accurate. (See the story in I Kings 22:1-40).

The Shrewdness of the Serpent

When Jesus tells his disciples that in facing the wolves, they need to be as shrewd as a serpent, what does he mean? Is he hinting at the serpent in Genesis three that deceived Eve and Adam? When we think about it, that serpent was confronted with a profound challenge. Adam and Eve had never met him and had no reason to be talking to him. This meant the serpent had to somehow intrude into their lives in such a way that they would not simply dismiss him or refuse to talk to him. He had to successfully make what we have come to know as a cold call. How does one who is unknown, unfamiliar find a way to engage strangers and get them talking, conversing? The serpent found a way.

He asks a question of Eve that totally exaggerates the mandate God had given Adam and Eve. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?' How was Eve going to respond to such a question? All she had experienced in her life told her God was good and God had provided for all her needs. For her the question the serpent is asking needs to be refuted. Eve must responsibly defend God for the serpent has it all wrong. Surely, she can't keep silent when God's reputation is at



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stake. What she does not understand is when she speaks up, she, in fact, has opened herself to a conversation with the serpent. The clever serpent has broken through to her. She goes on to respond verbally. “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the trees in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” Eve not only rejects the serpent’s question but goes on to re-state God’s command to stay completely away from just that one tree and its fruit or else.

Here we see the serpent scoring a second victory. Not only has he in shrewdness got Eve talking but he has brought her to say God’s command which up till now she has been okay with accepting as a truth only God understands. She in faith has been ready to accept God’s warning for He has always been looking out for her. However, the serpent knows faith is different than sight. In other words, she has no solid evidence that God’s command was going to be good for her. Facts are real and are hard to question. Faith on the other hand demands trust in the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the other person. Trust is invisible. There is no tangible object here which one could reach out and feel. So, the serpent has now found an opening to exploit. Eve has no external proof to go on that God has her well-being in mind.

The serpent is now looking at a decisive opening, an opportunity for him to question God’s credibility. He says, “You will not die for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The serpent has now discovered the very area where Eve is most vulnerable. God has not given Eve a fully laid out proof that he is not deceptive. The serpent understands that. He uses the possibility that God could be lying to get Eve thinking in a whole new direction. She could become even like God herself. Then she would be no longer just a created being dependent on God but an independent being with no more need of God. Short term thinking whispers, “What an appealing possibility.” That deceitful message has not only been intriguing people down through the history of mankind but has most often been accepted as reality. By living with the belief that one can be one’s own god, one has now put oneself in Satan’s camp without realizing it. It looks good for a while till one discovers the serpent Satan is there to hate, steal, and destroys the very life God has given a person so that person can be with God even after dying. Yes, we all are dealing, as Eve was, with the father of lies, Satan, who puts himself shrewdly forth as an angel of light. (II Corinthians 11:4). We must ever take up God’s word and Christ’s work meant for us so we can defend ourselves against Satan’s deceitful attacks for he is shrewd. (See what Christ quoted from Scripture to Satan in Matthew 4:1-11.