

## Is Matthew 5:22 saying that we can never identify anyone as a fool? If so, how does that square with Proverbs, which teaches us to identify a fool?

The short answer is no, Jesus is not saying that we may never identify anyone as a fool. He is saying that when such a judgment is the fruit of unrighteous anger it is worthy of condemnation. The text comes at the head of a series of statements in which Jesus corrects errant rabbinical interpretations of the Law.

The Law says, “You shall not commit murder” (Exodus 20:13). Jesus is revealing that the act of murder is the fruit of unrighteous anger in the heart, and even if one's external actions fall short of murder, the murderous intent in the heart causes guilt. This is in line with the general corrective that Jesus provides to the rabbinical teachers, which may be summed up in the truth that man looks upon the outward appearance but God looks upon (and judges) the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

The two epithets, *Raca!* and *You fool!* are hurled out of a heart of fury. Both are in the vocative case, meaning that they are being used as terms of address (as in, “Hey! Fool! Talkin' to you!”), not simple assertions (as in, “That man is a fool.”). They are attempts to destroy, using the tongue as the instrument of violence, which is precisely why the one using them is culpable. Proverbs 10:11 speaks of the relation between speech and violence: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, But the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.” The Psalmist makes the same connection: Psalm 52:2, “Your tongue devises destruction, Like a sharp razor, O worker of deceit”.

Does this mean that we may never judge someone to be a fool? It certainly *does* mean that we may never make such a judgment as the fruit of our rage or anger against someone. In such a case we would be guilty. But when we are given the book of Proverbs that equips us so well to identify a fool, it is hard to believe that all such identification is sinful.

The word “fool” or “fools” appears 59 times in 58 verses in the NASB translation of Proverbs. Three separate Hebrew words are translated, “fool”:

- אָוִיל – one who despises wisdom (Prov 1:7) and mocks when guilty (Prov 14:9).
- כָּסִיל – a fool, stupid fellow, arrogant one. One who believes that turning from evil is unthinkable (Prov 13:19), who is deceitful (Prov 14:8), who has no sense (Prov 17:16) though in his hand is the price of wisdom (a good verse for students).
- נָבֵל – a fool or vile person (this is nabal – think Nabal and Abigail, 1 Sam 25:3). A person who rejects, not necessarily the existence of God, but the relevance of God (Psalm 14:1), one who sins with his mouth (Proverbs 17:7), one who brings grief to his father (Proverbs 17:7).

It must be that God provides us with such a rich set of characteristics of a fool, because He intends us to, (a) not become a fool, and (b), recognize one when we see one. I believe that the end of the matter is this: to hurl such a term at someone as an epithet borne out of anger is clearly forbidden by Jesus in Matthew 5:22. This is beyond question. However, to come to the calm, clear-headed conclusion that an individual is a fool, based upon a comparison of behavior with the Scripture, is a clearly legitimate activity. The results of that activity could be to warn a fool of his ways for his own good, to warn others to stay away from a fool for their good, lest they learn his ways, or to make other decisions necessary to protect individuals or organizations from the ways of a fool.