

# *Simplicity and Prudence*

*Proverbs 14:15*

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*“The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looks well to his going.” - Prov. 14:15 (Cf. ver. 8; 4:26; 6:1).*

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## **Interpretation**

In many times and areas throughout history the idea of “simplicity” has been seen to be almost a virtue and a quality to be cultivated. But, interestingly, Solomon did not see it as such. Here in Proverbs 14:15 he lays out a contrast between what he calls “simplicity” and what he calls “prudence”. The word used for “simple” here is very close to the idea of sincerity and often refers to one who is open and/or honest or direct and without hypocrisy. Now, that does not seem at all negative to us - but the tendency of the definition, in Solomon’s time (nor in centuries after Solomon wrote this) was to apply it to the uneducated, inexperienced or unsophisticated and easily deceived or taken in by those sought to do so. In our more modern times, we might see this as applied to those have grown up, for instance and into “country” boys (not meant as they mean it on television).

Biblically, simplicity is associated with ideas like

- integrity (2 Sam. 15:11),
- without evil (Rom. 16:18),
- generosity (Rom. 12:8),
- a life of devotion to God (2 Cor. 1:12), and
- simply believing the gospel truth (2 Cor. 11:3).

God is said to “preserve” the simple (Ps. 116:6). Proverbs is filled with sayings about the simple, both good and bad (Proverbs 1:22; 14:15, 18; 21:11). As he uses this word in other places (see above) to speak of very positive traits, we must think that, in this instance he likely has those “good” character issue taken to an extreme that put the possessor in some danger of suffering some lack for their presence. This seems to use here in this verse where “simple” idea is contrasted with “prudence”. We can’t believe that Solomon is unaware of the true meaning of the word “simple”, but that he has some specific application in mind, and we see that application momentarily when he contrasts it with the concept of “prudence”.

Just after the mention of “the simple” he talks about this person as one who “believes every word”. To believe is a widely used word and sets a bit of a negative application when used in the context it is used here. It is not so much that they take folks at their word, so much as it is that they do not (or are not able to - for whatever reason) hear and think critically about what they hear. Those reasons may be

1. Because they don’t want to believe,

2. They are unable to discern that falsehood of what they hear, or perhaps, as seems to be the case here,
3. They cannot discern because they have been taken in and cannot tell the difference between what they hear and falsehood.

We should also note that Solomon seems to be implying that this “simplicity seems to carry with it and almost deliberate sense. The word appears elsewhere in the OT and at times carries the sense of the action that follows is pursued as an act of faithfulness, they are faithful to a given commitment or promise because, in their simplicity, they pursue or allow a course that they feel is demanded of them. It is also, at times, given as “assurance” and hints that this pursuit of a false path is taken because of the assurance that it is the correct path to take.

Though we see, in our day, the positive application of the “simple” quality, I suspect that we can also agree with Solomon that it has its’ very destructive aspect as well.

That, I believe, is why the word, in this verse, is contrasted with the concept of being “prudent”. The word literally means “to pass part of...” We would suggest the it then speaks of one who by “considering well...” apparently “passes by” some part of what he hears. The simple one just takes in whatever he/she hears and treats it as truth where the “prudent” one passes some it. It is this considering that causes him/her to do so.

This very vividly sets out Solomon’s point for us. Though simplicity has its’ good and praiseworthy aspects and application, Solomon underscores that it has an extremely threatening application as well. One can be “too simple” and set ones’ self in danger of being taken in or of making some mistake. By the way... “steps” here refers to some given course of action. As we have said, such a given course of action on the part of an individual is protected, at least to some degree, by thoroughly “considering” it and its’ implications.

## **Summary**

Though sometimes used in a good sense (Ps. 116:6), the word rendered “simple” generally means, as here, one who allows himself to be easily persuaded and misled. Contrasted with him is “the prudent man,” who “*takes heed to his (every) step,*” “*considers and proves his way*” (ver. 8).

## **Illustrations**

- We’re told that it was overly and culpable simplicity the world, by these qualities, was ruined.
- Joshua was taken in by the Gibeonites, through not asking counsel at the mouth of the Lord (Josh. 9:14).
- Potiphar was imposed upon by hearing only one side.
- The younger prophet wrongly followed his inclination in lending a ready ear to his senior.
- Ahasuerus (as is often the case with men in power) was too willing to give credence to a favorite counsellor.

- But David showed prudence when he distrusted Saul (1 Sam. 24:22),
- This same David was one of those who was a type of all whom Jesus called as witness when He did not commit Himself to the Pharisees (John. 2:24).
- Nehemiah was eminently wary and cautious, making sure every step, or his enterprise must have failed.
- Sergius Paulus is well styled “a prudent man,” who looked into the momentous question before him for himself, and was not to be beguiled by the sophistries of an Elymas.

## *Application*

Why is it that we must not believe every word? The world would be far pleasanter to live in if we might. How happy in its trustfulness is a little child until deceived! Suspicion is generated by falsehood; and alas! in this world, where lying is so prevalent, and man preys upon man, we must be to some extent suspicious if we would not be victimized. In *temporal* matters, then, it behoves me to be always on my guard. Not to trust every one; not to take advice without well weighing it; not to listen to flattery; not to confound credulity with candour or charity. I must try before I trust, and “prove all things” before committing myself to an opinion about them. “The prudent man” is like an intelligent traveller on an unknown road, who applies his mind to its bearings, consults his map, asks guidance of others but does not follow it without consideration, keeps steadily in view the end at which he aims. So let me act in regard to all matters of this life. But most of all in regard to things *eternal*. Oh, what need to “make sure steps” (Heb. 12:13) on “the way everlasting”! Not to be wavering and “carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14); not to believe every spirit (1 John 4:1), for that is fatuity; not to count “all men liars” (Ps. 116:11), for that is undue suspiciousness; but to believe every word of God, which is faith, and to “hear the Church,” which is duty.