

LEAD! B.1 From Humanism to Wisdom

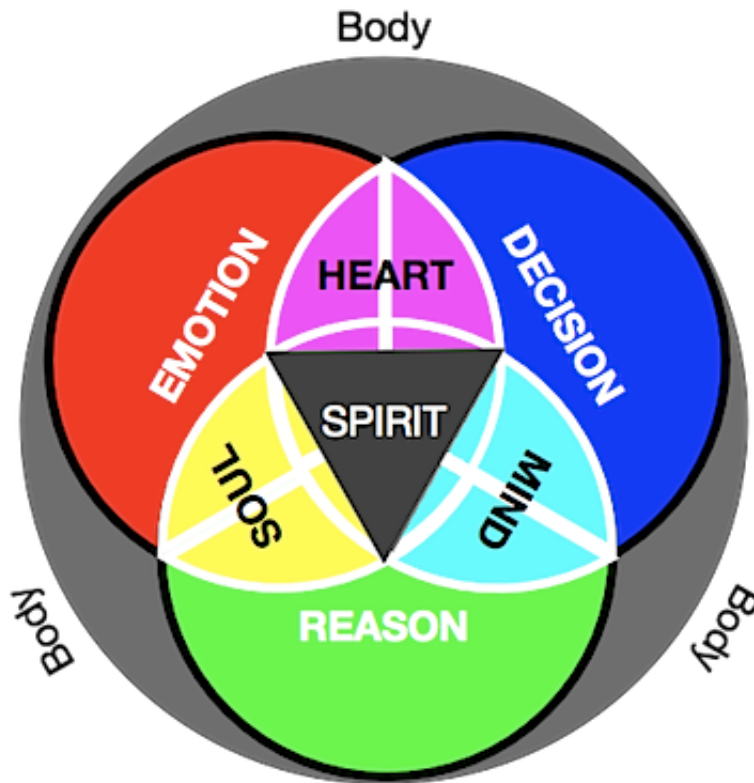
In Which Our Character is Conformed to God's Name, Via The Pursuit of Wisdom

In our first twelve-week series on [Theological Foundations](#), we focused on *what* it means to be "[baptized](#) into [the name](#) of [the Father](#), [Son](#), and [Holy Spirit](#)", moving from [sin](#) to [sanctification](#) as the [body of Christ](#) entering into His [Kingdom](#).

In this our second [series](#), we focus on *how* we can appropriate that "name" in our own lives -- as well as those of the people we lead and serve. This is the essence of **Christian Character**, the second leg of our "[LEAD](#)" tripod (the third and final one being "Skills for Service", coming in Spring 2009).

The goal of character formation is to bring our "whole person" into alignment with the "whole name" of God -- His identity, character, and purpose. We can define the whole person using the "triplet" model below, which has:

1. Our Spirit at the center...
2. ... working through our Heart, Soul and Mind... (cf. [Mark 12:30](#))
3. ... which together produce Emotions, Reasons, and Decisions...
4. ... that manifest in actions of our Body



While all models are imperfect, and there are many other ways to picture the human [psyche](#), this diagram will help us understand the role of Wisdom in character formation -- and how we fall short...

Admonition

Read [Proverbs 1](#). Why is Wisdom so important?

Bible

[Psalm 107](#)

We begin in the Psalms, where find a beautiful illustration of many of the themes which will shape our study of wisdom:

[107:1a](#) Oh, give [thanks](#) to the [LORD](#), for [He is] [good](#)!

The first and most essential truth we must confront is that **God is good**. This may seem so obvious as to be a cliché, yet the Psalmist chose to command the Israelites to appreciate it. For while God's goodness may sound nice in theory, the practical implications are often difficult to swallow. [C.1]

Which may be why the Psalmist takes pain to remind us:

[1b](#) For His [mercy](#) [endures] forever.

In particular, we earlier defined goodness as "*fitness for a purpose*." If God is truly good, then that means He is perfectly suited to His role as ruler of the universe, and that everything He does is completely in line with His purpose: glorifying His name through all creation -- including us:

[2](#) Let the [redeemed](#) of the LORD say [so], Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy, [3](#) And gathered out of the lands, From the east and from the west, From the north and from the south.

Unfortunately, we mortals do not so easily accept **our** role as His creatures; in fact, we would rather take over God's role as arbiters of our own destiny! Nonetheless, *our* purpose is to be conformed to *His* image -- which again sounds nice in the abstract, but can be quite painful in reality. [C.2]

Because that process is so difficult, we usually substitute something *e/else* for His image. We may recognize and work on our own imperfections, but only with respect to the higher desires of our **own** spirit -- what Freud might call the [super-ego](#).

Those innate desires are the result of many influences: e.g., our upbringing, culture, education, and religious instruction. Those standards do have some value, at least in terms of societal benefit; yet they -- even religious ones! -- are ultimately human constructions, and thus fall short of the fulness of God's character. [C.3]

The practice of measuring ourselves against human standards -- of treating "man as the measure of all things" -- is usually labeled "humanism" (though the term also has

other, more benign uses). As Christians, we reject the philosophy of humanism with our heads, yet often practice it in our hearts.

In particular, [Proverbs](#) identifies three common ways we fall short of [God's wisdom](#):

- The [Simple](#), who ignores Wisdom because it is too difficult
- The [Mocker](#), who trusts in his or her own Wisdom
- The [Fool](#), who scorns both divine and human Wisdom

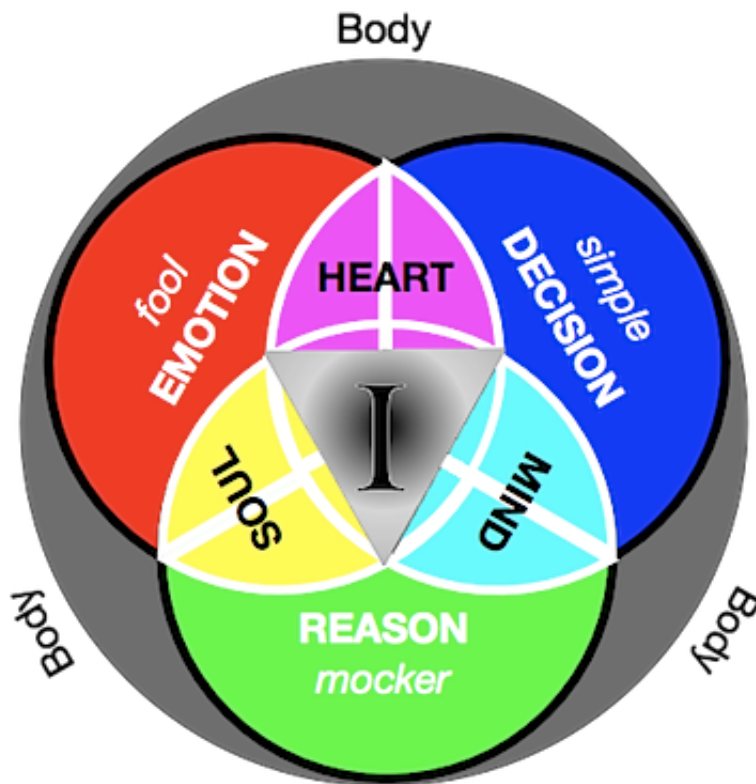
The relation between them is summarized in the following table:

Adapted from "Foundations of Wisdom" (below).
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Attribute	Simple	Mocker	Fool
Fear of the Lord	God cannot hold me accountable, because I did not know better.	God cannot hold me accountable, because I am not subject to his stupid ways.	God cannot hold me accountable, because he does not know what I do or think.
Mocker	Follows mockers	Is a mocker	N/A
Folly	Inherits folly	Gains folly due to God's opposition	Has one or more follies.
Destructive path	Waywardness	God's opposition	Complacency
Solution	Prudence	Humility	Understanding
Power of gospel	Faith	Hope	Love

We can roughly map these onto our personality chart above, for example:

- Mockers are proud of their ability to Reason
- The Simple hate to Reason, they just want a Decision -- preferably from someone else (usually a Mocker)
- Fools fail to follow even their own Reasons and Decisions, due to their Emotional damage.



We all sometimes fall into each of these categories, though most of us tend towards one or the other. [C.4]

The root cause of all of them, though, is a desire to live life on our terms, rather than submit to God's instruction. This is why the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (cf. [Proverbs 1:7](#)).

God's purpose is to form His image in us -- which ultimately is our only route to true [happiness, holiness, and honor](#). Yet to do that, He must first break us of the idolatry of self.

This is what we see in Psalm 107. God in his mercy deals with each of these three idolatries in turn, starting with the Simple:

⁴They wandered in the [wilderness](#) in a [desolate](#) way; They found no city to dwell in. ⁵Hungry and thirsty, Their [soul](#) fainted in them.

This is the plight of the Simple, to wander directionless in the world without wisdom until their trust in their own simplicity gives out. But if they have sufficient Faith in God's unseen wisdom to cry to the Lord (instead of turning to a Mock), He will show them the right way and establish them in a safe place.

⁶Then they [cried](#) out to the LORD in their trouble, [And] He [delivered](#) them out of their distresses. ⁷And He led them forth by the right way, That they might go to a city for a dwelling place.

⁸Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! ⁹For He satisfies the [longing](#) soul, And fills the [hungry](#) soul with goodness.

Next, we see how God must deal with the Mocker:

¹⁰Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, Bound in [affliction](#) and irons-- ¹¹Because they [rebelled](#) against the words of God, And [despised](#) the counsel of the Most High, ¹²Therefore He brought down their heart with labor; They fell down, and [there was] none to help.

Because the Mocker's heart is full of pride, God in His mercy must afflict them so that they lose faith in themselves. But if they come to Hope that God's wisdom surpasses theirs -- instead of escaping to Folly -- then He can deliver them:

¹³Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, [And] He saved them out of their distresses. ¹⁴He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, And broke their chains in pieces.

¹⁵Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! ¹⁶For He has broken the gates of bronze, And cut the bars of iron in two.

Finally, we come to the Fool, whom in modern terms we can describe as an Addict -- someone whose devotion is focused on a self-destructive substance or behavior (cf. [Proverbs 26:11](#)), instead of wisdom:

¹⁷Fools, because of their [transgression](#), And because of their [iniquities](#), were afflicted. ¹⁸Their soul abhorred all manner of food, And they drew near to the gates of death.

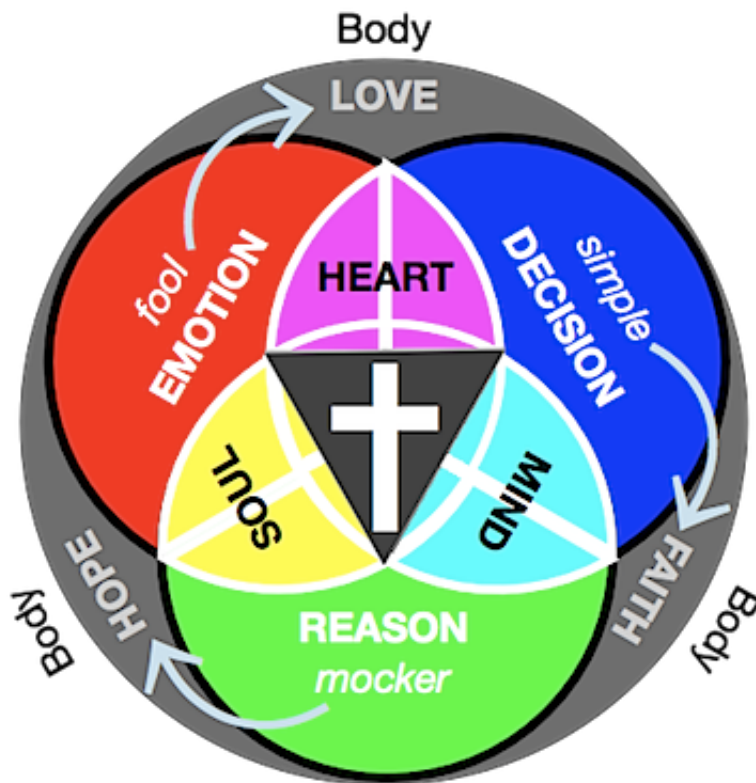
The Fool is trapped in a vicious cycle of self-punishment, which can easily lead to death. But if they embrace God's Love before it is too late, they can still be healed:

¹⁹Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, [And] He saved them out of their distresses. ²⁰He sent His word and [healed](#) them, And delivered [them] from their destructions.

²¹Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! ²²Let them sacrifice the sacrifices

of thanksgiving, And declare His works with rejoicing.

The three [theological virtues](#) -- Faith, Hope, and Love -- are what each of these personalities need to embrace God's wisdom, through the power of the cross of Christ, as illustrated in the following diagram:



We will study each of these in more detail over the next three lessons. [C.5]

However, lest we think tribulation is always focused on specific character flaws, the Psalmist reminds us that some trials are common to all people:

[23](#)Those who go down to the sea in ships, Who do business on great waters,

[24](#)They see the works of the LORD, And His wonders in the deep. [25](#)For He commands and raises the stormy wind, Which lifts up the waves of the sea.

[26](#)They mount up to the heavens, They go down again to the depths; Their soul melts because of trouble. [27](#)They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, And are at their wits' end.

Yet even here the solution is the same:

[28](#)Then they cry out to the LORD in their trouble, And He brings them out of their distresses. [29](#)He calms the storm, So that its waves are still. [30](#)Then they are glad because they are quiet; So He guides them to their desired haven.

[31](#)Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! [32](#)Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, And praise Him in the company of the elders.

To acknowledge God's greatness (His sovereign power):

[33](#)He turns rivers into a wilderness, And the watersprings into dry ground; [34](#)A fruitful land into barrenness, For the wickedness of those who dwell in it. [35](#)He turns a wilderness into pools of water, And dry land into watersprings.

And His goodness (His unending mercy):

[36](#)There He makes the hungry dwell, That they may establish a city for a dwelling place, [37](#)And sow fields and plant vineyards, That they may yield a fruitful harvest. [38](#)He also blesses them, and they multiply greatly; And He does not let their cattle decrease.

[C.6]

For God is at work through all human affliction, to remind us that we are but dust:

[39](#)When they are [diminished](#) and brought low Through [oppression](#), affliction and [sorrow](#), [40](#)He pours [contempt](#) on princes, And causes them to wander in the wilderness [where there is] no way;

Why? To bring glory to His name -- and joy to our souls -- by showing the riches of His wisdom and mercy:

[41](#)Yet He sets the poor on high, far from affliction, And makes [their] families like a flock. [42](#)The [righteous](#) see [it] and [rejoice](#), And all iniquity stops its mouth. [3](#)Whoever [is] [wise](#) will observe these [things], And they will [understand](#) the [lovingkindness](#) of the LORD.

The question is, do we have the eyes to see what God is doing, and the heart to submit to it?

Conversation

1. When have you had the most difficulty trusting that God is good?
2. Share a painful experience that God used to hone your character.
3. Before you became a Christian, how did you measure your own virtue? Even

- after, what human standards do you still sometimes rely upon?
4. Which of these three types (Simple, Mockers, Fool) would your family and friends say best describes you? Why?
 5. In which virtue -- Faith, Hope, or Love -- do you most need to grow?
 6. When bad things happen, are you most likely to doubt God's a) greatness (power), b) goodness (love), or c) purpose (wisdom)?

Decision

- **Repentance:** Of which aspect of your self are you most proud? Ask God to break that idol.
- **Action:** How can you nurture Faith, Hope, and Love in your life, and the lives of those you lead and serve?
- **Worship:** Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His mercy endures forever.

Explore More

- [Wisdom – International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#)
- [Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society: Encouraging the character formation of future Christian leaders](#)
- [Love God With All of Your Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength. Love Your Neighbor is Loving God](#)
- [Radically Normal: A Centered Psychology of Virtue](#)
- [YouTube – Hillsong From The Inside Out](#)

For Next Week

For next week, read [Hebrews 11](#). How does faith produce works? At what cost?

References

1. [Back to Virtue](#), by Peter Kreeft:
 - Introduction: Is Virtue out of date?
 - 2. Western Culture on the Couch: A Spiritual Psychoanalysis
 - 4. Justice, Wisdom, Courage, and Moderation: The Four Cardinal Virtues
2. **Foundations of Wisdom**, by Dick Hockett:
 - 1. Wisdom's Role in God's Plan
 - 2. Introduction to Proverbs
3. **Blue Letter Bible**. "[Psalm 107](#) – New King James Version." Blue Letter Bible. 1996–2008. 25 Dec 2008. < <http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?t=NKJV&b=Psa&c=107> >