

How to deal with Fools?

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Date: 11 July 2021

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[0 : 00] We're reading from Proverbs chapter 26, verses 1 to 12. Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honour is not fitting for a fool.

Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, a curse that is causeless does not alight. A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools.

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool, cuts off his own feet and drinks violence. Like a lame man's legs which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

Like one who binds the stone in the sling, is one who gives honour to a fool. Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard, is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

[1 : 12] Like an archer who wounds everyone, is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard. Like a dog that returns to its vomit, is a fool who repeats his folly.

Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There was more hope for a fool than for him. What is a fool?

When I ask that question, what comes to your mind? What comes to my mind immediately is Homer Simpson. I love the Simpsons. He's stupid, ignorant and repeatedly gets himself into trouble.

Most people, when they think of what it generally means to be foolish, is to be stupid, unwise, silly, reckless. But here's the problem.

We all agree that a fool is someone who does unwise things. But what we determine to be unwise is quite subjective.

[2 : 21] We think people hoarding toilet paper are foolish. We've seen that again in recent weeks. But they're probably thinking about the same thing of those who don't hoard toilet paper.

Often our definition of a fool will be determined where we've come down on an issue. Mac or PC. Labor, liberal.

Manual or automatic. There are endless things which determine what we think is foolish. And we never think we are the fools. But is the book of Proverbs so subjective in its definition of what makes someone a fool?

It's important to know because depending on what we think a fool is, will change the way we interpret these Proverbs before us today. Now, the key to interpreting Proverbs, the short two-line sayings of Proverbs chapters 10 to 30, is to interpret them in light of chapters 1 through 9.

Chapters 1 through 9 act as the introduction to the whole book, defining biblical wisdom and calling us to it. Now, what do we learn in chapters 1 through 9 about fools?

[3 : 36] Well, if you can quickly turn to chapter 1, verse 7, let's look at the key verse to the whole book of Proverbs. And it says this, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Now, this verse shows us what it means to be wise, but it also defines the fool. The fool does not fear the Lord.

Instead, they despise wisdom and instruction. Thinking about the rest of chapters 1 through 9, the fool is the one who chooses Madam Folly.

The adulterous woman. You might remember her from when we've previously looked at Proverbs in the past. The fool chooses Madam Folly over lady wisdom, God's wisdom.

He chooses to participate in the idolatry and thinking of the nations around Israel, instead of listening to God and worshipping God alone.

[4 : 39] Now, this gives us a different definition of fools, though, to what we would usually think. As Graham Goldsworthy says, The root of his trouble is spiritual, not mental.

At bottom, what he is rejecting is the fear of the Lord. It is this that constitutes the fool. End quote. A fool is not someone who has below average brain capacity.

The fool is someone who rejects God. Instead of being humble and accepting wisdom from God, he chooses folly to be wise in his own eyes. He interprets the universe without reference to God, determining for himself what is right and wrong and how he should live.

Now, that definition of foolishness sounds a lot like sin, doesn't it? And that description sounds a lot like the people in this world, the people in our lives.

In fact, if we're honest, often we fit into this definition of foolishness. So, as we go into these passages about fools, try to keep the Bible's definition of fools in the back of your mind and be prepared to concede that maybe even you, maybe even me, maybe even I have been acting like a fool.

[6 : 09] With that, let's get into our passage. Now, this passage answers the question, how should we deal with fools? As we've said, this describes most of the world.

Verses 1 to 3 answer that question and introduce us to the main idea of the passage. And this is what it is. We should not give honour to fools. Instead, we should discipline them.

Look at verse 1. Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honour is not fitting for a fool. Now, similar to many of the proverbs in this chapter, this proverb is a simile.

Kids, you probably love that word. How do we know it's a simile? It starts with that word like. And a simile is a figure of speech comparing one thing with another thing of a different kind to make a description more emphatic or vivid.

And in this verse, Solomon compares honouring fools to weather events which don't fit into certain times of year. In Israel and in most places in the world, it never snows in the summer or rains in the harvest.

[7 : 22] In fact, if it did, these normally welcome things would be natural disasters. Over the past few years, parts of Australia have been in drought. And we prayed for rain and finally rain came, but it also came at the wrong time.

And in large amounts, causing devastation, destroying crops, killing animals. So just like how these events don't match those times of years, honour is not fitting for a fool.

You should not honour a fool. It just doesn't match up. And if it did, it would be like a natural disaster causing havoc. Now, I should say, the call to not honour fools does not mean we should not be loving or respectful to them, of course.

In the Bible, I guess there's a difference. And you just need to look at the life of Jesus to see that. He might not have honoured fools, but he did love them. He was loving towards them. Now, what does it mean to honour a fool?

What does it mean to honour anyone? Us Aussies have tall poppy syndrome, so we don't think of honour often. Well, we honour fools by valuing them.

[8 : 37] We can be deceived into thinking they are wise and are deserving of honour. And so we value them. Or we know they are foolish, but we selfishly value the things we know they can give us.

Next, we honour people by listening to them, hearing what they have to say, and not just that, but taking it on board. And lastly, we honour people by praising them.

We can praise them verbally, or we can show our praise to them by giving them a gift or a role. Bruce Waltke calls honouring giving people social weight.

So when we praise them, we're elevating them in the eyes of others. In ancient Israel, you could honour someone by giving them a role in government or by giving them a place of honour at a feast. But how do we honour a fool today? What does that look like? I know I don't go around appointing politicians, though technically I do, but not really.

[9 : 43] And I don't give people seats of honour at a feast. Well, we value, listen to and praise fools. We value, here's a long list, worldly friends, musicians, actors, media personalities, pastors even, influencers, activists, politicians, and we listen to them.

We uncritically consume and listen to their content on TV, social media, the internet, and things like Netflix. And we let their foolish, unbiblical way of thinking and values influence us.

And then we praise them, telling people how great they are. I've been thinking recently about the TV shows I watch. They're quite tame compared to today's standards, but 10 or 20 years ago they would have been scandalous.

And if you compare what they value, these TV shows, to the Bible, I have to conclude that they're sinful and foolish. And yet I keep valuing, I keep listening, I keep praising.

What fools are you honouring in your life? In verse 2, we come to the only proverb in this passage which does not have the word fool, but it still describes them.

[11:07] Look at verse 2. Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, a curse that is causeless does not alight. Now this verse is a contrast to verse 1.

Verse 1 told us that honouring a fool will cause damage. Verse 2 tells us that a fool cursing someone who is blameless will not cause damage.

And it's actually referring to cursing in the more mystical sense. You know, solemn utterances invoking supernatural harm on someone.

But in a supernatural society, a curse would have caused worry and anxiety. You'd be worried about that fool who just put a curse on you. But this verse is saying, when a fool curses you, you don't need to worry because it won't affect you.

Just like how swallows and sparrows, they flit around but they never land. Because God is the source of true blessing and curses, not fools.

[12:15] Which brings us to verse 3. We've been told not to honour fools. How then should we deal with them? We should discipline them. Look at verse 3.

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools. That's pretty rough. He's essentially saying the fool is just as bad as an animal.

You get an animal to do the right thing by bribing and whipping them. We might not like that here in this city, but I'm pretty sure that's still what farmers do out in the country.

And the fool is the same. The only way he will do the right thing is through discipline. And this is so true of how we as humans operate. Last term, we looked at the doctrine of total depravity.

That man is completely sinful and therefore he doesn't choose God. But then Corduwood said, this doesn't mean people are as sinful as they possibly can be. Why not?

[13:17] Well, one reason is given in Romans 13. And Romans 13 says that it's God who installs governments to be a terror to bad conduct and to punish it.

The reason our foolish society is not as bad as it can be is because God has given us a government which will discipline us.

And the less a country has a government which can enforce the law, the more chaotic that nation becomes. But I think this is not just talking about control but also correction.

A whip and a bridle, they don't just control an animal. They steer them back in the right direction. While discipline is needed to control fools, it can also help correct them and lead them out of their foolish ways.

But how should we discipline a fool? Whacking people isn't really going to help. We see the answer in verses 4 and 5.

[14:18] We should discipline them with wise correction. Not according to their folly, but in a way their folly deserves. Look at verses 4 and 5.

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Now, there are two main schools of interpretation for these verses. The first acknowledges that they were purposely placed side by side and argues that these verses demonstrate that we should not see Proverbs as absolutes, but as generalisations which are sometimes true.

Therefore, what these verses are essentially saying is that sometimes you should respond to a fool. You shouldn't respond to a fool because you'll be stooping to their level.

Or sometimes you should answer a fool because that's how they'll be saved from their foolishness. And it's up to you to wisely decide when to be quiet or when to speak up.

[15:27] Now, I think there is a time to be quiet and there is a time to speak, but I don't think that is what these verses are saying. The second way to interpret these verses can be demonstrated in the way the New American Standard Bible translates them.

And then NASB says this, Let me read that again.

Notice that slight difference in how it doesn't give us an excuse to be quiet.

John MacArthur says, Taken together, these verses teach the appropriate way to answer a fool, e.g. an unbeliever who rejects the truth.

He should not be answered with agreement to his own ideas and presuppositions, or he'll think he's right. Verse 4. But he should be rebuked on the basis of his folly and shown the truth, so he sees how foolish he is.

[16:47] Verse 5. End quote. I think these verses also mean if someone is speaking to us in a foolish way, angry or argumentative, we don't respond in the same way.

Instead, we respond in a way which will actually help them. A commentator, Fox, summarises all this by saying, Don't answer a fool with behaviour similar to his.

Answer a fool with an answer appropriate to his folly. Now, what does this look like in practice? James 1, verse 19 helpfully says, Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. When a friend, co-worker, family member, or another Christian is saying something not in line with God's word, we should remember the words of James and make sure we're quick to listen to what they are saying, thinking what could be behind these words.

And what does God actually say? Maybe ask clarifying questions so you know what they are actually saying. Then reply, showing the foolishness behind what they're saying.

[18:05] We also need to be slow to anger. When the conversation gets heated, remember Proverbs 15, verse 1. A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

And sometimes you might not know the answer there and then. You can't think on your feet. It's okay to say, I don't know. I need more time to think about this.

But make sure you actually do go away and think about it and come back to them. I think extroverts like myself are prone to speak too quickly and not listen and end up acting and saying foolish things.

And I think introverts are prone to not speak quickly and be able to see the folly but never speak.

And that's something you should keep in mind. How should we discipline a fool?

With wise correction. Not according to their folly, but in a way their folly deserves. Now this brings us back to the topic of honouring fools.

[19:11] Why should we not honour fools? Well, verses 6 to 10 show us that when we get them to do something, they're dangerous and useless. They're dangerous and useless when they use God's word.

Therefore, honouring them is dangerous and useless. Now, verses 6 to 10, they form a chiasm. There's a weird word. Now, a chiasm is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and they're repeated in reverse order.

It's like a mirror image. Now, often a chiasm will then include an idea in the middle that stands by itself. And by the fact of it being in the middle, it means it's emphasised and it's the main idea of the chiasm.

And if my hand gestures and what I'm saying makes no sense, I'll show you as we go along. So we're going to work our way from the outside in to the main idea. And so the outer idea of the chiasm is seen in verses 6 and 10, which say this.

Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence. And then look at verse 10. Like an archer who wounds everyone is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard.

[20:27] They're both talking about hiring people and what happens. Verse 6 is saying getting a fool to send a message on your behalf is only going to cause damage to yourself.

They'll somehow mess up the message and cause you problems. This is a problem every primary teacher understands very well. In verse 10, hiring a fool will not only cause damage to yourself, but to others.

Notice, though, the comparison in verse 10 isn't to the fool, but it's to the one who hires a fool.

There's a book and a movie called We Have to Talk About Kevin, where this psychopathic son commits a school shooting with a bow and arrow.

If you hire a fool, it's like you're that son releasing terror on society. Getting an ungodly fool to do something for yourself is useless because they will not achieve what you want.

And it's dangerous because it will inflict injury onto yourself and to others. You only have to read a few chapters of the Bible or a history book or listen to the news for five minutes to see how true this is.

[21:41] We then now move into the next layer of the chiasm, verses 7 and 9, which show us fools are useless and dangerous when using God's word.

Look at verses 7 and 9. Like a lame man's legs which hang useless is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Verse 9. Verse 7 shows us wisdom is not just about possessing proverbs or God's word. If you're a fool, it's not going to be any of use to you, just like a lame man's legs are no use to him. Remember, fools despise wisdom and instruction. If you don't come to God's word ready to submit to it, it's going to be useless to you.

In verse 9, it's not only going to be useless to you, it may well be very dangerous. This could mean, verse 9 could mean the drunk man doesn't realise he has a thorn in his hand because he's drunk. But it could also mean, it could also be referring to a drunk man holding a thorn bush and you don't know what he's going to do with it. Some people would translate it like a thorn bush in the hand of a man as opposed to like a thorn going into the hand of a man.

[23 : 07] Now, when someone is drunk, they're hard to control and they do crazy things. A fool, using God's word dangerously, can also cause damage.

And we see this often. Journalist Julie Baird has been investigating domestic violence in the church and has found that scripture has been misused and forced women into silence.

Churches like Bethel and Hillsong perpetuate the word of faith and prosperity gospel heresies. That we can name and claim anything we want in faith and that God wants us to be healthy and wealthy. Now, these teachings have caused massive damage in the third world and have tarnished the reputation of the church. Fools are useless and dangerous when using God's word.

Therefore, verse 8, honouring them is useless and dangerous. Now, we've come to the middle and main idea of the chiasm. Look at verse 8. Like one who binds the stone in a sling is one who gives honour to a fool.

[24 : 18] Just like we saw in verse 1, don't honour fools. Why? It's like putting a rock in a sling, like a slingshot, but then binding it so that it can't come out.

Imagine the David and Goliath story. David goes to the creek, he picks up some rocks and then he puts it in his sling and then he ties his sling so the rock can't come out.

David tries to release the rock at Goliath, but it doesn't come out because he's tied it in the sling. Goliath then reaches David and kills him in one stroke of the sword. Honouring a fool is just like doing something as nonsensical as that.

It's not only dangerous, it's useless. If you go into a battle with a sling like that, it's useless. And also, kids, it's dangerous to swing rocks around your head.

You might hurt yourself or those around you. If you honour a fool, if you value them, if you listen to them, if you praise them, you're being as stupid as someone who binds a stone in a sling.

[25 : 29] Why should we not honour fools? When we get them to do something, they're useless and dangerous. They're useless and dangerous when using God's word. Therefore, honouring them is useless and dangerous.

So is there any hope for a fool? They let off curses. They're like animals. Well, in verse 11, we see there is no hope in themselves.

Look at verse 11. Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly. A dog will usually vomit because they've ate the wrong thing.

And because they're stupid animals, they can't help but go back to what just caused them the vomit and go for seconds. This is like a fool who keeps repeating his folly.

He does something foolish. It has negative consequences. But he finds himself going back to it. Indeed, he disgustingly finds his foolishness desirable.

[26 : 34] And this is a vivid way to describe the effect of sin in our lives, isn't it? Like heroin addicts, we sin. It has horrible effects. But we love it and we keep going back to it.

Peter quotes this verse in 2 Peter 2 verse 22 to describe those who turn away from Christ and go back to the sinful ways of the world.

He says, going down this path, they have no hope of salvation. So is there any hope for a fool? Not in themselves.

They're stuck in the cycle of folly and they don't have power to escape it. Which brings us to verse 12, which shows there is hope for fools if they can admit they are fools.

Look at verse 12. Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

[27 : 33] This proverb is the punchline to the whole passage. It's been talking about the sorry state of fools, but then says there is hope for them compared to the person who is wise in his own eyes.

And we're thinking, I thought the fool was wise in his own eyes. But it stops us in our tracks and makes us think, am I wise in my own eyes? I've been judging the fool, but am I a fool? And we have to go back through the passage and ask the questions. Do I baselessly curse others? Do I only do the right thing to avoid negative consequences? Do I say foolish things? Has God's word been ineffective in my life? Do I find myself repeatedly going back to my sin, causing myself harm, but disgustingly enjoying it? Am I wise in my own eyes? Not looking to God for wisdom. There is no hope for a fool if they remain wise in their own eyes, because they would never admit they are fools. [28 : 42] But there is hope when by the grace of God they hear the wise correction of others and can admit they've been fools. What is repentance?

It's a change of mind. It's turning from your sin to God. It's admitting to God that you have been sinful and foolish. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, 26-30. You might like to turn there. He says this, For consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. [29 : 51] And because of him, you are in Christ, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

So that as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. The Christian is the person who sees they're foolish and comes to Christ and says, I am sinful and foolish. I need you to be my righteousness and wisdom. That's why the Christian cannot boast in themselves. That's why they boast in the Lord. That's why they can't be wise in their own eyes. Because the Christian is the one who admits they could never have been smart enough or good enough to save themselves. That's why Christ had to die. It's this paradox that for us to be wise, we first have to admit we are fools. Now, I must ask, have you admitted you're a fool to God? Have you acknowledged your sin to God? Or have you been wise in your own eyes, thinking you don't need him? [30 : 56] Christ calls you today and says, you've been a fool. You've rejected me. You have no hope in yourself, but trust in me. I took the rod.

I took the wrath that you deserve. You are foolish, but I am wisdom. You are sinful, but I am righteousness. You can't change yourself, but I am sanctification. You can't redeem yourself, but I am redemption. Christ says, repent. Admit your sin. Admit your foolishness and trust in me. Now, if you are a Christian, someone who has admitted to God that you are sinful and foolish, entrusted in him to be your righteousness and wisdom, the only way you'll be able to not honour fools and instead wisely correct them is by continually looking to Christ. Because of our foolishness, we deserve dishonour from God and we deserve his punishment. But Christ came and took our dishonour. He took our punishment. So that now in him, we've become honourable. As you meditate on this, you will value Christ more and more and you'll want to honour Christ more and more, which will stop you from honouring and valuing the fools of this world, won't it? [32 : 24] This will also give you the courage to want to correct fools in need of God's wisdom. We aren't good at correcting people, are we? We can be harsh or judgmental.

But as you focus on Christ, you'll remember your foolishness and his love, which will empower your correction to always be accompanied by love and humility. And that's what people need in correction, isn't it? Don't honour fools, honour Christ. And lovingly correct fools empowered by Christ. Let's pray. Lord, we admit our foolishness to you today. We live our lives not in awe of you, not fearing you, not loving you, without reference to you, Lord. And we honour the foolish things of the world, Lord. But we're thankful for Christ who can make us wise, who brings us back to you. Lord, who helps us lovingly correct the fools of this world. [33 : 35] Lord, help us do these things by your spirit, empowered by what Christ has done for us through this week. In Jesus' name, amen. ■less are a witness. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.