

Proverbs 26 – Applying Wisdom with Wisdom

As we've been reading through Proverbs, we've received God's everlasting wisdom for everyday life. Some aspects of that wisdom give clear boundaries in every circumstance—trust God's wisdom, not your own (1:7; 2:3; 3:5); don't choose to take the way of wickedness (4:14); guard your heart (4:23); enjoy marriage and avoid seduction (5); live with integrity (10:9). There are other aspects of God's wisdom, though, that we must continue to seek out and carefully consider, depending on the circumstance.

For instance, Proverbs 26:4-5 teaches us that sometimes we should not answer a foolish person, and other times we should. We have also learned that we should rescue those in need and will be held accountable for our decisions in those situations (24:10-12). Yet here in Proverbs 26:17, we find there are instances where meddling in other's business might be pure foolishness. Sometimes wisdom minds its own business, and other times it takes on someone else's need as its business.

There are situations where there are no hard and fast rules for us to follow. This is precisely the reason why we must seek God's wisdom every day. Wisdom approaches difficult situations with complete trust in the Lord, inviting Him to guide our thoughts, words, and behavior so that He might be glorified always, even in situations where the wise answer is not immediately clear.

What is a situation where you should not "answer a fool according to his foolishness" (v. 4)? What is a situation where you should (v. 5)?

¹Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool. ²Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an unmerited curse does not come to rest. ³A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools! ⁴Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. ⁵Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.

As snow in the summer and rain in the harvest: These things are out of place and in an economy based on grain grown in the field, they are disasters of bad timing. A snowfall in summer would signal the times are out of joint and would be catastrophic (cf. [1 Samuel 12:17](#)). Snow or rain ruins the grain harvest by damaging and causing it to rot. **Honor is not fitting for a fool:** Honor for the fool is also out of place – and can lead to disaster. The 'fool' is the stupid person who is worthless and vain (just the kind of person popular culture seems to honor).

The present age, through the tricks of publicity, is especially prone to idolize 'vain persons', for whom the treatment of [Proverbs 26:3](#) might be better medicine. Because he neither deserves it, nor knows how to use it, but his folly is both increased and publicly manifested by it.

Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow: Solomon described birds that fly without taking rest on a branch or a surface. **So a curse without cause shall not alight:** In the same way that a bird will fly without landing, so a **curse** that someone makes without proper cause before God will not alight. If someone pronounces a curse it does not have magical properties; there must be cause before God for it to have any power. Therefore, if the heart knows that a curse is unjust it may rest in the certainty that it cannot harm.

Whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey: There is an instrument appropriate for these animals. There is also an instrument that fits the fool: **a rod for the fool's back.** What they will not learn from the words of wisdom they must learn through the infliction of pain. Like brute animals, force is the only language they understand. This proverb, with its fellows, is written for us in two capacities: as people dealing with fools, and as potential fools ourselves.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly: When a fool pours forth his foolishness, it is often right to not answer them. Sometimes contending with a fool can make one just like the fool. When he is incorrigible, or when he is inflamed with passion or wine, etc., or when it is not necessary, nor likely to do him good. One should not descend to his level of thought. To get into an argument with a fool like that would only make one look like a fool as well.

Answer a fool according to his folly: Other times the right thing is to answer a fool. Sometimes a wise answer to a fool will expose his folly and prevent him from becoming wise in his own eyes. Answer a fool when he is capable of receiving good by it, or when it is necessary for the glory of God, or for the discharge of a man's duty, or for the good of others. Answer that agrees with the Lord's wisdom puts the fool's topsy-turvy world right side up and so is fitting

⁶ Sending a message by the hands of a fool is like cutting off one's feet or drinking poison.

⁷ Like the useless legs of one who is lame is a proverb in the mouth of a fool. ⁸ Like tying a stone in a sling is the giving of honor to a fool.

⁹ Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.

¹⁰ Like an archer who wounds at random is one who hires a fool or any passer-by.

¹¹ As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly. ¹² Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them.

He who sends a message by the hand of a fool: One should never expect a good result. It is like harming one's self. Curiously, God chose the foolish things of this world to be His messengers ([1 Corinthians 1:27](#)), but He wants them to be something better than fools in His work.

Like the legs of the lame that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of fools: Solomon colorfully explained the nature of the fool.

- The fool's possession of wisdom (such as a proverb in the mouth) is useless, like the legs of the lame.
- The fool's receiving of honor is stupid, like the one who binds a stone in a sling so that it can't be cast out. A sling was made of a leather or textile strip that had been broadened in the middle and into which the stone was placed, but never bound. The stone tied in the sling may swing back around and hit the slinger.
- The fool's attempt to proclaim wisdom brings pain, like a thorn that goes into the hand of a drunkard. He handles it hard, as if it were another kind of wood, and it sticks in his hand. Just like profane persons pervert and pollute the Holy Scriptures, to their own and other men's destruction.

These are absurd illustrations, but no less absurd than giving to a fool that honor and praise which he is not capable either of receiving, or retaining, or using in the right manner, but it is wasted on him, and hurts him more than it does good.

Gives the fool his hire and the transgressor his wages: God's guidance and governing over all things extends to the fool and the transgressor. He will make sure they get what is due, as both their hire and their wages.

As he made all so he maintains all, even the evil and the unthankful...or he allows them a livelihood, gives them their portion in this life, fills their bellies, but by it sends leanness into their souls, or if he fattens them, it is to fit them for destruction.

As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly: A fool will not change their ways apart from a dramatic transformation. Just as it is in the dog's nature to return to his own vomit, it is the fool's nature to repeat his folly. [2 Peter 2:22](#) used this verse to illustrate the repulsive nature of a sinner returning to their sin.

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? Despite the severe treatment of the fool, Solomon thought of a man in even worse danger – the proud man, the one wise in his own eyes. This is a special type of folly, one that will never learn the ways of wisdom. The greatest fool is the fool who does not know he is a fool.

The danger is a very subtle one. We are prone to be wise in our own conceits, without knowing that we are so. A simple test may be employed. When we fail to seek divine guidance in any undertaking it is because we do not feel our need of it. In other words, we are wise in our own conceit. There is no safer condition of soul, than that self-distrust, that knowledge of ignorance, which drives us persistently to seek for the wisdom which comes from above.

*¹³ A sluggard says, "There's a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!"
¹⁴ As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. ¹⁵ A sluggard buries his*

hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. ¹⁶ A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven people who answer discreetly.

There is a lion in the road: The lazy man will create any excuse to avoid work. A lion in the road was a virtual impossibility in Biblical times. The lazy man shows creative talent (imagining not only a lion, but a fierce lion) and a form of work, but it is dedicated to the effort of avoiding work.

As a door turns on its hinges: The only way a door can turn is on its hinges. The humor in this verse is based on the analogy with a door—it moves but goes nowhere. Likewise, the sluggard is hinged to his bed. The only turning the lazy man does is on his bed. But does not leave his bed, unless lifted or knocked off. So neither comes the sluggard out of his feathered nest, where he lies soaking and stretching, unless hard hunger or other necessity rouse and raise him.

It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth: The lack of energy and initiative in the lazy man is so profound that he can't or won't properly care for his personal needs. The sluggard dislikes any form of work and the very thought of exerting himself exhausts him.

The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes: The lazy man may lack energy and initiative, but he doesn't lack a high opinion of himself. He considers himself smarter than seven men who can answer sensibly. The lazy man has great confidence in his own abilities but never seems to accomplish much.

¹⁷ Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own. ¹⁸ Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death ¹⁹ is one who deceives their neighbor and says, "I was only joking!"

He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own: Some find it irresistible to get involved in the disputes of other people. The quarrel doesn't really belong to them, but he makes it his own. Jesus knew when to not get involved in another's dispute (Luke 12:14). Meddles: literally means 'become excited'. **Is like one who takes a dog by the ears:** It is a foolish and dangerous thing to take a dog by the ears. Once one does, it's hard to let go without getting bit, and the dog never appreciates it. There is a world of difference between suffering as a Christian and suffering as a busybody. Even with Christian intentions, many of us are too fond of meddling in other peoples' affairs. This proverb is true ninety-nine times out of a hundred, where people meddle with domestic broils, or differences between men and their wives.

Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death: Solomon painted the picture of a fierce warrior with many weapons, spreading destruction everywhere. **Is the man who deceives his neighbor:** The man who plays tricks on others, deceiving them, and covering it by saying, "I was only joking!" is a danger to others – and a very unwelcome companion. He indulges in the pure love of mischief. His annoyance is seen as harmless play. His companions compliment him on his cleverness and join in the laugh of triumph over the victim of his cruel jokes.

*²⁰ Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down.
²¹ As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife. ²² The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.*

Where there is no talebearer, strife ceases: Just as wood fuels a fire, a talebearer, tattletale or gossip fuels strife. The fire won't continue to burn without the wood, and the strife won't continue when the talebearer stops. James described the power of words to set a destructive fire ([James 3:6](#)). As long as there is an ear to receive, and a tongue to pass on, some piece of malicious slander will continue to circulate.

The tale-receiver and the talebearer are the agents of discord. If no one received the slander in the first instance, it could not be propagated. Hence our proverb, 'The receiver is as bad as the thief.' And our laws treat them equally; for the receiver of stolen goods, knowing them to be stolen, is punished, as well as he who stole them.

So is a contentious man to kindle strife: Strife doesn't create itself. It has a maker, and it is the gossip, the talebearer, the contentious man. In the absence of such a person, old hurts can be set aside, and discord can die a natural death. Even so, we often find a juicy tidbit of defamation irresistible.

The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles: This proverb, repeated from Proverbs 18:8, explains that the gossip and evil reports brought by the talebearer are almost impossible to resist. Those who should know better find it difficult to tell the talebearer to stop talking.

The words of a gossip in an unguarded moment may inflict irreparable injury. This evil may be welcomed in certain circles that thrive on scandal. But that does not alter the real character of a gossip, who is detested by both God and man.

They go down into the inmost body: When we receive the words of a talebearer, they normally have an effect on us. The words go down into us and often change the way we think and feel about people, even if what the talebearer says isn't true or isn't confirmed. God gave a strong word regarding the confirmation of testimony ([Deuteronomy 19:15](#), [2 Corinthians 13:1](#), [1 Timothy 5:19](#)).

*²³ Like a coating of silver dross on earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart.
²⁴ Enemies disguise themselves with their lips, but in their hearts, they harbor deceit.
²⁵ Though their speech is charming, do not believe them, for seven abominations fill their hearts. ²⁶ Their malice may be concealed by deception, but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.*

Fervent lips with a wicked heart: There are people who are able to speak with power and persuasion, but they have a wicked heart. The ill effect of their wicked heart is made much more effective because of their fervent words.

Wicked men are said to speak with a heart and a heart, as speaking one thing and thinking another. Like earthenware covered with silver dross: This is an example of something that looks superficially good with a silver veneer, but it is worthless earthenware on the inside. So, the man mentioned in the first line may attract people superficially, but inside he is worthless. Lips which make great professions of friendship are like a vessel plated over with base metal to make it resemble silver; but it is only a vile pot, and even the outside is not pure.

He who hates, disguises it with his lips: It is common for those who hate others – God or men – to disguise it with their words. They don't want to give up their hate, but they don't want to be known as a hater. Charming words might merely cover evil thoughts.

He lays up deceit within himself: The secret hater deceives others, but he also deceives himself. He imagines himself to be a better man than he really is. When he speaks kindly, do not believe him: This secret hater should not be trusted. Even if he speaks kindly, his words do not reflect the true thoughts of his heart – his hatred is covered by deceit.

Seven abominations in his heart: Seven abominations is an abstraction for the full display of his wicked thoughts and deeds that utterly offend the moral sensibilities of the righteous.

His wickedness will be revealed before the assembly: Whether this assembly is in the world or the world to come, the wickedness and evil heart of the secret hater will be revealed. He shall be found out, sooner or later. God will wash off his varnish with rivers of brimstone. The assembly: refers to a legal assembly convened to try the enemy's evil deeds and to dole out punishment. In Proverbs justice is given out in an indefinite future that outlasts death.

²⁷ Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them. ²⁸ A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it: In His judgments, God often appoints that people reap what they sow; that He will treat them the same way they have treated others. They will fall into the pit they dug for others; the stone they rolled against someone else will roll back on them. Examples: Haman ([Esther 7:10](#)) and Daniel's enemies ([Daniel 6:24-28](#)).

A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it: The liar does his destruction without sympathy for others. He does not feel sorry for the ones he crushes; he actively hates them. Lying is an act of hatred. In one way or another, lies destroy those whom they deceive. Therefore the liar despises not only the truth but his victims as well. **Those who are crushed**: Classifying himself among the oppressed Paul said: '***We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed***' ([2 Corinthians 4:8-9](#)).

Flattery is another way the lying tongue brings ruin. Their flattering mouth builds pride and manipulates others for deceptive goals. The heart of the matter is exposed with the fact that deceit, whether it hurts or soothes, is practical hatred, since truth is vital, and pride fatal, to right decisions. False love proves to be true hatred. Pray for wisdom to discover the snare, for gracious principles to raise us up above vain praises, for self-denial, for the capacity to be content and even thankful without such flatteries. This will be our security.