

# Proverbs 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Verses 4 and 5 foreground a feature of proverbs more generally, that they can often seem contradictory. Wisdom is required to interpret and to apply a proverb effectively, and here we have two proverbs that are seemingly directly contradictory, placed in immediate juxtaposition.

Clearly the compilers of these proverbs, if not Solomon himself, want us to reflect upon how they go together. Various proposals have been given for understanding the relationship between these two proverbs. Some focus chiefly upon the different contexts within which they could be applied, whereas others suggest that some sort of equivocation might be taking place. What is meant by answering a fool according to his folly in the first proverb may not be the same as what it means in the second.

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There is a dialectical character to wisdom, where different principles push against each other, and you need to hold these different principles in conversation. People who would absolutize one principle without counterbalancing it by another are always in danger of falling into folly. It can be a very dangerous thing to enter into a quarrel with a fool. He is far more likely to bring you down to his level than you are to bring him up to yours. Furthermore, to onlookers you will be associated with him, the people that you choose to dialogue with are often seen to be your counterparts. It is very easy to cheapen wisdom by bringing it into conversation with fools. We can think of the illustration that our lord gives of throwing pearls before swine. Or in Proverbs chapter 29 verse 9, if a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet. Trying to reason with a fool in such a situation merely sets up your wisdom to be drowned out and to be ridiculed. Besides this, by speaking to the fool on his own terms, you risk giving legitimacy to his opinions. The fool isn't motivated by the truth, he's motivated by the folly in his heart, and the more that you try and reason with him, the harder it will be for people to discern the difference between your sort of speech and his sort of speech, because you're having to deal with him on his own terms. There are, however, considerations on the other side. A fool who speaks unchecked is in great danger of becoming wise in his own eyes, which is a far more dangerous state. He can be puffed up thinking that he is wise because no one has challenged him. In such a situation, it may be important to speak directly to his folly and to address it forcefully and openly. Perhaps one of the best ways to do this well is to consider the audience who are listening to you address the fool. The role of the audience may be a critical factor in helping us to understand the counsel that's being given here. In the encounter between the wise man and the fool, the wise man likely has to be very alert to the way that other people view the fool and his engagement with him. The ideal is to discredit the fool in the presence of the assembly, but not to get entangled in conflict with the fool. Say enough to expose the fool as a fool, but don't try and best him in an argument. He is impervious to reason and you'll just end up looking like a fool yourself. As a modern illustration of this, you might think of the advice given to people online. Don't feed the trolls. There are occasions when the trolls need to be exposed as trolls, but most of the time it's best just to keep your distance. Verses 6 to 10 have a chiasmic or bookended structure. As Bruce Waltke observes, verses 6 and 10 concern the hiring of a fool, which you should not do. Verses 7 to 9, the fool using proverbs, and then at the centre, giving honour to a fool. It is that central element that explains the rest. The other things that are mentioned here, the fool bearing words of wisdom in his mouth, or the fool being entrusted with responsible tasks, are all unwise forms of honouring the fool. The fool is a figure who should be exposed, disgraced, and pitied. He should never be honoured, and any that honour him are merely inviting trouble. If the faithful messenger is like an extra pair of feet for the person who sends him, and also like a refreshing drink or someone who brings healing, the foolish messenger is quite the opposite. The person who sent him is worse off than if he had no messenger at all, and he ends up receiving violence rather than receiving health. Proverbs are lame and powerless in the mouth of the fool. The fool doesn't know how to use them. However, in his ignorance of how to use them, he can actually cause damage, as we see in verse 9. He is like a drunkard wielding a thorn bush.

The commissioned fool is also like an archer that ends up hurting people. The wise person will know better than to hire or to give an education to the fool, who will merely use it to cause damage, and to confirm him in his folly. The fool confirmed in his folly is described in verse 12, the man who is wise in his own eyes. Far better to be a base and obvious fool than to be a fool with the veneer of learning, a fool who is heeded and is given reason to believe that he has something to contribute. The inveterate fool is the subject of verse 11. For such a fool, his folly has become so habitual that there is no hope of his escaping from it. 2 Peter chapter 2 verses 21 to 22 uses this proverb, For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness, than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them. The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.

Verses 13 to 16 concern the sluggard. Verse 13 largely repeating Proverbs chapter 22 verse 13. The sluggard says, There is a lion outside, I shall be killed in the streets.

One point of this proverb is that the sluggard will habitually rationalize his laziness. Verse 14 compares the sluggard to the door moving on its hinges. The sluggard is set in his bed, as the door is set in its hinges. Neither has an extensive range of movement. However, the door turning on its hinges can actually be useful. The sluggard, however, is nothing of the kind. Proverbs chapter 19 verse 24 read, The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, and will not even bring it back to his mouth. In verse 15 we are told that the reason for this is that he is so worn out. The sluggard perpetually complains of his tiredness. He cannot exert himself, even when he has food directly in front of him. He will end up starving because of his failure to put in any effort. Verses 5 and 12 have spoken of the danger of someone who is wise in his own eyes, and the sluggard is one such example. The sluggard is the classic example of the incompetent person, who because he has not put in the effort to understand things, doesn't even know the measure of what he doesn't know. He is the pub expert. One might think, for instance, of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in Pride and Prejudice, as she spoke of the piano. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. True wisdom and skill takes discipline, diligence and application. The sluggard lacking all of those things never attains it. Verses 17 to 22 concern quarrelers and those who cause conflict.

Keeping out of conflicts not your own was the subject of Proverbs chapter 22 verse 3, and it's the subject of verse 17 here. The person who gets embroiled in other people's fights is merely inviting trouble. Verses 18 to 19 concern the cruel jester, the person who would mask his vicious action as a prank or as a mere joke. He is compared to a madman hurling dangerous projectiles.

[ 11 : 50 ] Paying no care to his action, he is unmindful and utterly unconcerned about the damage that he might cause. Having the measure of such a person, you should keep well clear. Verses 20 to 22 concern other figures who cause trouble for all who are around them. There are certain individuals in communities who are the cause of all the conflicts and the strife and the difficulties. If you effectively remove such people, suddenly all of the conflicts and discord ceases. Proverbs chapter 22 verse 10 makes a similar point. Drive out a scoffer and strife will go out and quarrelling and abuse will cease.

Whisperers and slanderers are a particular danger. Proverbs chapter 18 verse 8. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. They go down into the inner parts of the body. That verse is repeated here in the context of these troublesome figures within a community. One should steer clear of such individuals and if you can, remove them from the community altogether. The concluding verses of the chapter concern unfaithful or hypocritical friends. Such persons are compared to the glaze or the sheen that can be on an earthen vessel. What may look attractive and precious on the surface may be nothing of the kind when you see underneath. These unfaithful friends are particularly defined by their lying tongues and by their flattery. They mask menace and hatred. It is quite possible that they don't feel hatred towards the people that they are deceiving and flattering. Rather they may just be seeking their own ends in a selfish manner. But that selfishness is tantamount to hatred of others. It leads just as surely to other people's ill. The wise person should be able to see through such figures.

A question to consider. Within this chapter we've seen the figure of the fool, the sluggard, quarrelers and those who cause conflict, and finally unfaithful and hypocritical friends.

We often see blurring of the lines between these various figures. What are some of the affinities that these different figures and their characteristic vices can have with each other?