

Wisdom in Discernment

Proverbs 26:1-16

Proverbs 16:1-16 - *“As snow in summer and rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool.*

Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, so a curse without cause shall not alight.

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the fool’s back.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly lest you also be like him.

Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

He who sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence.

Like the legs of the lame that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

Like one who binds a stone in a sling is he who gives honor to a fool.

Like a thorn that goes into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

The great God who formed everything gives the fool his hire and the transgressor his wages.

As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.

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

The lazy man says, “There is a lion in the road! A fierce lion is in the streets!”

As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed.

The lazy man buries his hand in the bowl; it wearies him to bring it back to his mouth.

The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.”

Background Notes

For background, let’s consider and explain verses 4-5: *“Do not answer a fool according to his folly lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own eyes.”* Wait a minute! Doesn’t that sounds like a contradiction? Verse 4 says don’t answer a fool according to his folly, and then verse 5 says answer a fool according to his folly. Well, we know it’s not a contradiction because this is the Bible, and there are no contradictions in the Bible! When properly understood and interpreted, the Bible does not contradict itself. Then how do we explain this apparent contradiction in verses 4-5?

It’s advice about the kind of answer you give a fool. Verse 4: *“Do not answer a fool according to his folly lest you also be like him.”* That is, don’t lower yourself to the level of a fool by losing your temper, or by giving a long answer that the fool won’t understand. That would be answering a fool “according to his folly” in the wrong way. Don’t answer him that way, because that would only make you look foolish.

Rather, answer a fool “according to his folly” in the right way - a short and to the point answer that doesn’t elevate the fool to where he begins to think he’s smart! Verse 5: *“Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own eyes.”*

Here's an example. On our GCM website (growingchristians.org), we get a lot of feedback from around the world. Most of the feedback, by far, is positive. But occasionally we get an email from a "Psalm 14:1 fool" who thinks he or she is the wisest person who ever lived. These people proceed to tear down the Bible and the Christian faith. We don't spend much time answering these people. (And we may not even answer at all).

So, Proverbs 26:4-5 are not really a contradictory proverbs at all. Rather, they are complementary!

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 1: *"As snow in summer and rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool."* Don't honor a fool. It's as out of place and as inappropriate as a snowstorm in summer! And it could be as dangerous as rain at harvest time, which could ruin the crops. We see this truth so often when celebrities are honored by popular culture. Not only is honor inappropriate for so many of these vain and shallow culture "stars" (and even "Christian stars"), but they mislead and ruin many promising young people. Love for the Lord and obedience to His Word is the only safeguard for potential problems in this area.

Verse 2: *"Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, so a curse without cause shall not alight."* Has a sparrow or swallow flying through the sky ever hurt you? No. And if you know the Lord, you don't have to worry or be superstitious about a curse that an unbeliever may claim to place on you.

Verse 6: *"He who sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence."* That's quite descriptive. If you cut off your feet or drink poison, you can be sure you have immobilized yourself. You're not going anywhere. In the same way, if you send a fool on an important mission, you're asking for trouble. You can be sure that there will be loss, or failure, or some kind of bad fallout. I've seen it happen. So whether in business or ministry, don't hire or depend on a fool.

Verse 7: *"Like the legs of the lame that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of fools."* A lame person can't use his legs properly, no matter how hard he tries. In the same way, fools cannot handle proverbs properly because they don't understand them. A fool can't use a proverb properly. In fact, he may even misquote a proverb, saying, for example, that "a bird in the bush is worth two in the hand" - showing that they totally misunderstood the meaning. (Most of us know that proverb is actually "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." And by the way - that's not a biblical proverb!)

Verse 8: *"Like one who binds a stone in a sling is he who gives honor to a fool."* Suppose we saw someone with an ancient sling – the kind David used when he fought Goliath - and we asked him why he was gluing a stone inside the sling's pouch. He explained that every time he tried to use a sling, the stone would fall out before he could sling it. That

makes no sense, and I think we would rightly consider him to be foolish. A sling is totally ineffective if the stone can't be released! So the point of the proverb is that it makes no sense - and is counterproductive - to give honor to a fool.

Verse 9: *"Like a thorn that goes into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools."* This proverb is very similar to verse 7, and the point there is that a proverb is useless when a fool awkwardly tries to use it. The point in verse 9 seems to be either of two ideas. a fool trying to make wise statements could be dangerous – like waving a thorn bush around - and a fool using a proverb is ineffective, as when an unsteady drunkard tries to pull a thorn out of his hand.

Verse 10: *"The great God who formed everything gives the fool his hire and the transgressor his wages."* The translation of this proverb is difficult, so we have various translations and various interpretations. The point of the New King James version (above) is that God repays the fool for his folly and sin. The New American Standard translation is: *"Like an archer who wounds everyone, so is he who hires a fool, or hires those who pass by."* The NASV point is that hiring a foolish employee is like having a "loose cannon" working for you!

Verse 11: *"As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly."* The point of this proverb is that fools don't learn from their experiences. They return to their disgusting habits, as dogs eat what they have previously vomited. The apostle Peter quoted this proverb about professing Christians who return to the world and the false teaching from which they were once delivered. *"For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to wallowing in the mire'" (2 Peter 2:21-22).*

Verse 12: *"Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."* Sometimes a fool will respond to discipline and will change, but you're wasting your time if you're looking for an arrogant and conceited person to change.

In verses 13-16, we have four proverbs about the sluggard.

Verse 13: *"The lazy man says, 'There's a lion in the road! A fierce lion is in the streets!'"* This proverb is very similar to Proverbs 22:13: *"The lazy man says, 'There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!'"* The point of both of these proverbs is that a lazy person will come up with all kinds of bizarre excuses to avoid going to work or doing jobs around the house. This proverb has plenty of practical applications. When I was trying to start a new Bible study, I kept a list of the unbelievable excuses people gave me - even silly excuses like: 'I don't have a good Bible.' (Well, we'll give you one!)

Verse 14: *"As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed."* A lazy person wants to look like he's making a move to get up and work, but he's actually only turning over in bed. He doesn't go anywhere - just like a door going back and forth on its hinges, but it doesn't go anywhere!

Verse 15: *“The lazy man buries his hand in the bowl. It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth.”* That's pretty lazy, isn't it? This proverb should be encouraging to you if anyone ever accuses you of being a “sluggard.” You can always say you're not, because you're not yet too lazy to stop eating - and then quote this proverb!

Verse 16: *“The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.”* The lazy person is convinced that he has his act together, and he's happy that way. Seven wise people can advise him to get a job, or try to correct his thinking, but he thinks he doesn't need to listen!

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Take control by cracking the whip and yanking the bridle.

Verse 3: *“A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the fool's back.”*

The point of this proverb is that horses, donkeys and mules are very useful and effective - as long as you can control them! You don't gain control of them by trying to reason quietly with them. To prevent damage and injury, there must occasionally be a cracking of the whip and pulling of the bridle when they don't respond properly.

Notice that the whip or rod drives forward, and the bridle holds back. An immature person must be learn discipline, perhaps even to the point of physical measures.

As a youth leader and a teacher of college age students, I'd occasionally have to follow this proverb with young people who were acting foolishly - even to the point of kicking them out of class until they'd come to their senses and had learned to control themselves. You may have to do this as a Christian parent, or as a Sunday school teacher. It is not wrong or unloving to occasionally discipline a foolish child, if the need arises.

Take control - by cracking the whip and yanking the bridle.