

God Rewardeth the Fool and the Transgressors – Proverbs 26

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Introduction

As Solomon concluded his lament over his own vain choices in life, he announced that he had issued warnings to help others avoid his errors. This statement is an inspired explanation of how the book of Proverbs came to be:

And further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs (Ecc. 12:9).¹

In the Proverbs, God, through Solomon, sought to teach men how to avoid evil and to live righteously without having to experience the bitter dregs of evil. Of course, some will not listen to reason or revelation and can learn only from the deep misery and guilt produced by the practice of ungodliness. However, the wise will heed God's words of warning (such as those in these Proverbs) and will thus avoid much pain and suffering. David fully understood this principle: "Thy word have I laid up in my heart, That I might not sin against thee" (Psa.119:11). It is tragic that he was not able to teach this to his son, who, though wise in so many ways, seemed incapable of learning many lessons of life, except by "experience." The Proverbs begin with Solomon's strong statement of purpose that others may learn to avoid evil by his precepts rather than by experience:

To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion: That the wise man may hear, and increase in learning; And that the man of understanding may attain unto sound counsels (1:4-5).

The twenty-sixth chapter is in the third major division of the book, which includes chapters 25-29. These chapters are identified as follows: "These also are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out" (25:1).

Chapter 26 naturally divides itself into 4 sections, according to subjects discussed:

1. Comments on those who are foolish (vv. 1-12)
2. Comments on those who are lazy (vv. 13-16)
3. Comments on those who are busybodies (vv. 17-22)
4. Comments on those who are hateful (vv. 23-28)

Exegesis and Exposition of Proverbs 26

Verses 1-12: Comments regarding those who are foolish

The word *fool* is found frequently in Proverbs. We find it 11 times in these first 12 verses of chapter 26; its companion, *folly*, appears 3 times. It is important to understand what sort of person Solomon is speaking of in this term if we would fully understand to whom his words

apply. He is not speaking of one who is congenitally slow-witted or dull, thus one incapable of rational thinking and behavior. R.F. Horton expounded on *fool* in this context as follows:

The word used uniformly throughout the particular passage before us has as its root the notion of grossness, the dull and heavy habit of one whose heart has waxed fat, whose ears are slow to hear, and whose higher perceptions and nobler aspirations have succumbed to the sensual and earthly nature. We have to think of moral, as well as mental stupidity, of insensibility to all that is true and good and pure.²

The fool of whom Solomon wrote here is one who had **chosen** to be a fool by preferring infidelity over faith in God, iniquity over righteousness, error over truth, and things of the flesh over things of the spirit. David wrote of just such a man: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good" (Psa. 14:1); "Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted" (Psa. 107:17). Since our age has a predominance of just such "fools," these words concerning them should be of much interest to us. With this definition of the "fool" in the context of the Proverbs, let us now examine what Solomon said about him.

Verse 1:

As snow in summer, and as rain in harvest, So honor is not seemly for a fool.

Solomon states that honor is not appropriate for a fool. In fact, it is just as out of place to honor an evil and perverse man as snow is in summertime and rain is in the time of harvest. Doubtless, Solomon wrote this passage from experience as well as from inspiration. The beginning of Solomon's downward spiral into apostasy and idolatry was in his elevation of a fool (the infidel daughter of Pharaoh) to be his queen in Jerusalem (1 Kin. 3:1).

Men yet are prone to give inappropriate honor to fools. By Bible definition, the Roman pope is a fool, yet he is paid disgusting honor by multiplied millions. It is not uncommon for politicians whose hands are soiled with graft and wickedness of various sorts to be lavishly praised. Even brethren make the same sad mistake of honoring evil men among us. It matters not to some college administrators how much false doctrine a brother may have taught and how much harm he may be causing in the kingdom. Despite evidence, warnings, and pleas from concerned voices, they will still honor such a "fool" by keeping him on their Bible faculties, featuring him on their annual lectureships, or inviting him to be their "missionary in residence." When a former president of a Christian college died a few years ago, his successor at that institution paid great honor to him as if he were a wise and godly man, in spite of the fact that he had left the church and become an Episcopalian!

Elders ignore Solomon's teaching when they continue to use false teachers for Gospel meetings. Preachers who continue to praise and cordially fraternize with fellow-preachers who are no longer sound in the faith are giving honor to fools. Reprinting a church bulletin article by a false teacher (even if it in itself teaches no error) is but to give him a platform he does not deserve and an implied credence for the times when he teaches/preaches error.

All such "fools" among us could have long ago been largely cut off from their disastrous influence on the saints had the inspired wisdom of Solomon been followed. Instead of marking and avoiding such "fools" as Romans 16:17-18 directs, gutless brethren, often in "high places" have seemed determined to honor them by giving them praise and a perpetual podium for their errors. We are made to wonder who the greater "fools" really are — those who have abandoned the faith in their false doctrine or those who continue to honor the ones who have abandoned the faith as if they had not done so? How utterly incongruous and inappropriate (to say nothing of grievous) to the faithful it is when "fools" continue to thus honor "fools"!

Verse 2:

**As the sparrow in her wandering, as the swallow in her flying,
So the curse that is causeless alighteth not.**

Although the word *fool* does not appear in verse 2, we should understand, due to context, that it has a direct connection with foolish behavior. Perhaps the practice of uttering a curse referred to in the latter part of the verse should be understood as behavior that is common to a fool. The meaning would thus be that we should not fear the curses or dire imprecations which are so frequently uttered by fools for they are as aimless and as harmless as birds flying through the air. I concur with H.A. Ironside's assessment of this passage:

Fools are ever ready to curse and anathematize, often to the great anxiety of ignorant and timid souls who live in dread of the fulfilment of the maledictions. But as the sparrow and swallow cleave the air and pass quickly from view, so shall it be with a curse uttered without cause.³

God's people should not let the threats and intimidations of fools, whether within or without the church, cause us to draw back from serving Him faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Verse 3:

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, And a rod for the back of fools.

Like verse 1, this verse sets up comparisons relating to fools. Verse 1 mentions some inappropriate things, while verse 3 mentions some appropriate things. Just as the whip and bridle are suitable for guidance and correction in dealing with beasts of burden, so does the

back of a fool deserve the rod of chastisement and reproof. Some believe that Solomon's words might be intended in a predictive sense, indicating that the consequences of the ungodly fool will sooner or later return to haunt him. This was his obvious meaning in a previous statement: "Good understanding giveth favor; But the way of the transgressor is hard" (Pro. 13:15).

Verses 4–5:

Answer not a fool according to his folly, Lest thou also be like unto him.

Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own conceit.

These verses as a unit are sometimes cited by skeptics as an illustration of a Bible "contradiction." On the very surface this is seen to be untrue, due to their immediate proximity to each other. Obviously, Solomon neither considered them to be in conflict when he wrote them, nor did he expect anyone to make a contradictory application of them.

Fools sometimes ask totally nonsensical questions and sometimes they ask them in a coarse, rude, and fiendish way. The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who constantly directed their unseemly questions to the Lord are a prime example of this behavior. To respond in kind is forbidden lest we lower ourselves to their level. Some questions do not deserve an answer, thus giving the querist, and/or the question, credence. Paul wrote to Timothy on this subject: "But foolish and ignorant questionings refuse, knowing that they gender strifes" (2 Tim. 2:23). The Lord admonished in the same vein: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet, and turn and rend you" (Mat. 7:6).

On the other hand, verse 5 enjoins us to answer the fool as he deserves to be answered. Foolish statements and questions that teach error are not to be ignored or left unchallenged. Error must be exposed, and folly must be unmasked. Peter's admonition is in harmony with Solomon's: "...being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). In this way one may reclaim some fool from his folly rather than allowing him to believe that his false doctrine is unassailable by our silence. However, whether or not he will open his eyes to the Truth and to his own error, we must still expose his foolish error by contending earnestly for the faith (Jude 3).

Verse 6:

**He that sendeth a message by the hand of a fool
Cutteth off *his own* feet, *and* drinketh in damage.**

Solomon here emphasizes the uselessness of entrusting to a fool the delivery of a message. It would make as much sense to cut off one's own feet or drink some deadly poison as to expect the message to be delivered faithfully. Yet, some brethren are still expecting that some among us who have proved themselves to be false brethren will deliver the Truth faithfully. How utterly senseless and unrealistic!

Verse 7:

The legs of the lame hang loose; So is a parable in the mouth of fools.

Unusable legs, sometimes of varying lengths, illustrate the attempted use of wise maxims by a fool. As the lame man is unable to walk, so the fool is unable to use or apply words of wisdom.

Verse 8:

As one that bindeth a stone in a sling, So is he that giveth honor to a fool.

The words in this verse are parallel to the teaching of verse 1, warning of the folly of honoring a fool, although a different comparison is drawn. To **bind** a stone in a sling (not merely place it there) would prevent its coming out—all of one's slinging would be in vain, for the bound stone would remain fixed. Likewise, it is vanity to honor a fool.

Verse 9:

***As a thorn that goeth up into the hand of a drunkard,*
So is a parable in the mouth of fools.**

The last phrase of this verse is identical to that of verse 7. However, the first phrase of verse 9 is far stronger than that of verse 7. When the drunkard has a thorn bush in his hand, he is likely to harm someone with it. Likewise, even words of truth and wisdom are dangerous when coming from the fool's mouth. He misuses and misapplies them to the injury of others. In verse 7, a fool vainly attempts to employ truth; here, he employs words of truth to the hurt of others.

Verse 10:

***As an archer that woundeth all, So is he that hireth a fool
and he that hireth them that pass by.***

The rendering of verse 10 is much disputed by the linguistic authorities, as can be observed by simply comparing the KJV and the ASV. Indeed, there is dispute on almost every word. While space forbids a full discussion of these matters, I refer the reader to a helpful review of them by Deane and Taylor-Taswell in *Pulpit Commentary*.⁴ According to the KJV, this verse reminds us that the Almighty God who made man also has the right to, and will, judge him. Particularly, He will surely recompense the fool who dares transgress His law, although His justice may seem to tarry and be afar off.

Verse 11:

As a dog that returneth to his vomit, So is a fool that repeateth his folly.

Many New Testament readers are familiar with this verse because of Peter's use of a portion of it (2 Peter 2:22). As the dog is wont to eat again that which he has vomited up, so the fool returns to and repeats his acts of folly again and again. Peter's application of this proverb is to those once redeemed from wickedness and error who turn back to them in their foolishness. As surely as the dog can consume its own vomit, so surely men once saved can be (and sometimes are) lost.

Verse 12:

Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him.

As hopeless as the fools of the previous verses are, Solomon tells us here of one fellow who is even worse off – the fool who is wise in his own conceit. A pride-filled, know-it-all, egomaniac is the consummate fool. No one can tell such a one anything. The last thing he will listen to is the suggestion that he may be full of pride and lacking in wisdom. He is the sort of fellow that one would like “to buy for what he is worth and sell for what he thinks he is worth.” Truly, no one can enlighten him!

Verses 13–16: Comments regarding those who are lazy

Verse 13:

The sluggard saith, There is a lion in the way; A lion is in the streets.

The slothful, the lazy, the sluggards are frequently reprov'd in Scripture. Solomon employs sarcasm and even some humor in his chastisement of them in this passage. The lazy person will make up any excuse to avoid his work or responsibility. He will even say that since

there might be the slight possibility that a lion is lurking outside, he therefore dare not even go out. When analyzed, this excuse is no worse than the lame excuses that lazy, unconverted church members have been heard to make for forsaking the assembly or shirking other godly responsibilities. The identical thought in this verse is also found in Proverbs 22:13.

Verse 14:

As the door turneth upon its hinges, So doth the sluggard upon his bed.

This verse likens the turning of the lazy person on his bed to the swinging of a door on its hinges. The door never moves from its pivotal point, only from the opened to the closed position, back and forth. Likewise, the dedicated lazy man's movement is only confined to moving from one position to another upon his bed, never straying from his inactivity.

Verse 15:

***The sluggard burieth his hand in the dish;
It wearieth him to bring it again to his mouth.***

Solomon dramatically portrays the extreme to which indolence affects some in this verse. Some are too lazy even to move the hand from a dish of food to the mouth (cf. Pro. 19:24). If the person who is too lazy to work does not deserve to eat (2 The. 3:10), how much less the fellow who is too lazy to eat when food is set before him!

Verse 16:

The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit Than seven men that can render a reason.

As the previous section of this chapter on fools closed with a reference to one who is "wise in his own conceit" (v. 12), so does this one. Verse 16 depicts the lazy man as one who is most ingenious in his own eyes, perhaps in his invention of many excuses, rationalizations, and subterfuges by which he is able to shirk his duty. He envisions himself far wiser than those poor "fools" who industriously and conscientiously go about their appointed tasks. This reminds us of many members of the church who seem to pride themselves in their excuses from the work that needs to be done, almost as if those few who are willing to do the work without excuse are the actual fools. While Solomon used humor and ridicule to expose the folly of laziness, it is no laughing matter, as Paul emphasized to the church in Thessalonica (2 The. 3:6-14).

Verses 17-22: Comments regarding busybodies

Verse 17:

***He that passeth by, and vexeth himself with strife belonging not to him,
Is like one that taketh a dog by the ears.***

Solomon here warns of the danger of injecting oneself unnecessarily into the quarrels of others. To take hold of the ears of a dog that passes by may cause one to be bitten and will not benefit the dog. Likewise, to take up the work of arbitration in a meaningless argument uninvited will likely bring injury to the arbitrator, while doing the disputants no good. These instructions must be weighed against circumstances when the Truth is under assault (Eph. 5:11) or those events wherein another is being physically assaulted, as did Moses (Exo. 2:11-12).

Verses 18-19:

**As a madman who casteth firebrands, Arrows, and death,
So is the man that deceiveth his neighbor, And saith, Am not I in sport?**

These verses comprise one proverb having to do with a person of such extreme mischief that he deceives his fellow man just for the fun of it. To such, scheming on some way to hurt another is a sick game. When one has mischievously harmed his neighbor by word or deed, the damage is not cured or diminished by claiming that it was only a “joke” or done “in fun,” any more than to cause death by some deadly weapon and then pretend madness as an excuse. While allowing that some commit crimes because they are truly insane, this passage indicates God’s attitude toward the frequency of ridiculous “insanity” pleas that are made in the courts of the land to excuse violent and criminal behavior. It also should provoke caution in those who tend to go to the extreme in perpetrating “practical” jokes that may cause great inconvenience, embarrassment, expense, or worse, even injury or death to those upon whom they are played (cf. Pro 10:23).

Verses 20-21:

**For lack of wood the fire goeth out; And where there is no whisperer, contention ceaseth.
As coals are to hot embers, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to inflame strife.**

The discussion of meddling in the affairs of others continues here. Solomon states a truism; fire will die for lack of fuel. Likewise, where meddling busybodies keep their mouths shut, contention, rumor, and slander will cease. Verse 21 conveys the same idea from the opposite perspective; just as a fire is kept burning by adding fuel, so the man who loves contention knows how to keep strife kindled by his evil tongue. It is for this very reason that Paul observed concerning some of the widows in Ephesus: “And withal they learn also to be idle, going about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not” (1 Tim. 5:13). James penned many words of warning about the damage we can do with our tongues if we fail to control them (Jam. 3:2-12).

Verse 22:

**The words of a whisperer are as dainty morsels,
And they go down into the innermost parts.**

This verse, a repetition of Proverbs 18:8, reminds us of the pain the talebearer inflicts. As that which is received as wholesome food but is actually spoiled with harmful bacteria and causes severe pain and illness, so are the words of the talebearer. Not only is the talebearer warned here, but also the tale-receiver. The willing and knowing purchaser of stolen goods is as guilty under the law as is the thief.

Verses 23-28: Comments regarding those who are hateful

Verse 23:

**Fervent lips and a wicked heart
Are *like* an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross.**

To the godly person there is hardly anything more despicable than a honey-mouthed hypocrite, the very person described in this verse. Here is the person whose lips “burn” with words of love and affection, but whose heart is full of envy, hatred, and vengeance. Such a one is as worthless as a broken piece of pottery that has some fake silver on it. We hear so much of “love” from those in the liberal and Crossroads camps, but such they give it only on their terms. Expose and mark the false teacher of liberalism and you will be called names you may not have heard before. The Crossroads folk are very “loving” toward their own until one disagrees with some of their human mandates, and then one suddenly becomes an outcast and the object of hateful phone calls from those “loving” people. John urged, “My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Solomon's description of these hypocrites is similar to the Lord's accusation that the scribes and Pharisees were whited sepulchres full of dead men's bones (Mat. 23:27-28). Many who give a first impression that they are solid “silver” turn out to be only cheap “silver plate.”

Verses 24-25:

**He that hateth dissembleth with his lips; But he layeth up deceit within him:
When he speaketh fair, believe him not; For there are seven abominations in his heart:**

This couplet of verses forms a single thought, continuing the condemnation of hypocrisy from the previous verse. Persons full of hate will sometimes disguise their true feelings by speaking fair and sweet words to their object, all the while storing up a heart full of schemes of revenge and damage when the opportunity arises.

Young Gospel preachers should especially heed the warning of these verses. Many faithful men have been the objects of the very thing described here. Some brother or sister may have taken serious offense because he preached the Truth on their pet sin or he refused to perform a marriage ceremony for their child who had already been married and divorced two or three times. Outwardly they may continue to speak sweetly and cordially to the preacher until others decide to attack him. Seeing their opportunity, yesterday's sweet-lipped brother or sister will then pour out the seven demons of hatred and vengeance they had been nurturing in their hearts all along as they join the hunt and the kill. Hypocrisy is a virtue to such folk!

Verse 26:

**Though *his* hatred cover itself with guile,
His wickedness shall be openly showed before the assembly.**

Solomon continues his emphasis upon the person who deceitfully cloaks his hatred with feigned deeds or words of love and friendship. One may be able to do this for a while, but sooner or later his wickedness of heart will reveal itself and be exposed to others. Even if he should be able to hide such hypocrisy from men, he cannot hide it from God, "who knowest the hearts of all men" (Acts 1:24). If not revealed "before the congregation" on earth, it most certainly will be revealed in the great "congregation" at the Judgment.

Verse 27:

**Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein;
And he that rolleth a stone, it shall return upon him.**

Here we have a strong warning to the hateful person who devises snares and traps for the object of his hatred, all the while maintaining his facade of sweetness and love. Solomon uses two figures to illustrate the danger and folly of plotting to destroy another. If one decides to do away with another by digging a pit for him to fall into, the digger is likely to trip and fall into it himself. If one plots to roll a stone down the hill to destroy another, he may find himself being caught under that very stone as he rolls it into position.

The classic illustration of this proverb's truth is seen in wicked Haman who was hanged on the very gallows he constructed for Mordecai (Est. 7:9-10; cf. Ps. 7:15-16; 9:15; 57:6; Ecc. 10:8). While Haman's hatred arose more from jealousy than from any sense of personal injury by Mordecai, let us learn that it is not our province to avenge evils done against us: "Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

Verse 28:

**A lying tongue hateth those whom it hath wounded;
And a flattering mouth worketh ruin.**

The first part of this verse states a truth that can be found in the uninspired proverbial literature of many nations: The one who injures another (whether by word or deed) hates the object of his injury. The emphasis here is not on the obvious fact that the injury inflicted demonstrates hatred toward its object, but that “Jim” also hates “Joe” and feels contempt for him because “Jim” has inflicted injury upon “Joe.” Perhaps Ironside caught the flavor of Solomon's statement in the following: “Conscious of having wronged another, and being determined not to confess it, the dissembler will store his heart with hatred against the object of his wrongdoing.”⁵

The “lying tongue” of the first part of the verse is the same as the “flattering tongue” of the second part. Naked flattery, distinguished from sincere complements or praise, simply consists of dressed up lies, spoken to gain some sort of personal advantage. Words of mere flattery bring ruin, but upon whom? There is a sense in which they will bring ruin upon those who speak them, for they are lies and all impenitent liars shall be damned eternally (Rev. 21:8). However, it seems more reasonable to understand this to be a reference to one who is ruined by believing the flattery bestowed upon him, as Keil and Delitzsch indicate:

...and 28b does not mention that the smooth tongue...brings injury upon itself (an idea that must be otherwise expressed; cf. 14:32), but that it brings injury and ruin on those who have pleasure in its flatteries...and are befooled thereby.⁶

The “smooth tongue” is not employed only to speak words of personal flattery. It is commonly employed by false teachers as they seek personal advantage. At least two ways of doing this are observable. First, there are those who will come into a congregation of the Lord's people under the cloak of sweet words and a kind demeanor, using their smooth tongues to attract a following before they begin delivering their deadly errors. Such are those Peter describes as ones “who shall privily bring in destructive heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1) and by Jude as being “certain men [who] crept in privily” (Jude 4). Paul describes such deceivers accurately: “...by their smooth words and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent” (Rom. 16:18). These heretics cause great ruin to those who are so enticed by their flattering words that they become blind and deaf to their damnable heresies.

Another type of smooth talker is the false teacher who yields to the pressure of unconverted church members to “Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits” (Isa. 30:10). These are the same folk who, in the midst of turmoil and crisis among God's people caused by doctrinal error, cries, “Peace, peace; when there is no peace” (Jer. 8:11). It is this type of smooth talker that is willing to tickle the itching ears of brethren who do not intend to control their ungodly lusts (2 Tim. 4:3). This type of preacher will say what his hearers want to hear if the price is right, sending the rankest sinner home each Lord’s Day “feeling good about himself.” Such behavior is an illustration of using godliness as a way of gain (1 Tim. 6:5) and is nothing less than unmitigated hucksterism! These are “teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake” (Tit. 1:11). Moreover, it is just as wrong to willfully **fail** to teach things which they **ought** to teach. Such silk-tongued preachers don't dare preach the whole counsel of God, knowing that they would soon be sent on their way for doing so, thus forfeiting what may be a handsome salary. Those who support, encourage, or even tolerate such dereliction of duty in the pulpit will reap the just recompense of their folly – eternal ruin! They are paying blind men to lead them to their destruction, and they and their leaders shall both end up in the pit (Mat. 15:14). Those who support and endorse false teachers share their guilt before God (2 John 9–11).

Conclusion

Let all who read the words of Solomon in this chapter take good heed thereto, lest they be found fools, indolent, busybodies, or hateful. Those who are such bring unnecessary suffering and ruin both upon themselves and upon those around them.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. R.F. Horton, *The Expositor's Bible*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), v. 3, p. 431.
3. H.A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Proverbs* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1970), p. 362.
4. W.J. Deane and S.T. Taylor-Taswell, *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), v. 9, pp. 500–01.
5. Ironside, pp. 375–76.
6. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), v. 6, sec. 2, p. 198.

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