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Wise and Foolish Speech

18: 1-21

A proverb is a short and memorable saying designed to be our blueprint for living in the world that ADONAI has created. It is important to note that proverbs are not promises; they are generally true principles, all other things being equal.

The fool's speech versus the defense of the righteous (18:1-11). This first subunit continues the topic of **the fool**, who is mentioned explicitly in **verses 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8**, and is mentioned indirectly in **verses 5 and 9**. **Verse 5** speaks of an ordinary person in contrast to **the wise**. Moreover, **verse 5** is the only one containing comparison parallels to contrast the two. All the rest are mocking, devoted entirely to **the fool**.

Introduction: The fool's alienation from society (18:1-3): Unfriendly people only care about themselves; they refuse to listen to common sense (18:1 NLT). The phrase, **unfriendly people** (Hebrew: *nifrad*) comes from the verb *prd*, which suggests *someone who is divided, either internally or externally*. I prefer the former since the verse describes **those** who are internally focused on **their** own desires, but such a focus would naturally separate **them** from the community. In the second colon, **they** are defined by **their** stance against **wisdom**, since **common sense** is related to **wisdom**. But for **those** who will seek **Him**, **ADONAI is a shield to those who walk with sound wisdom (2:7).**³⁵⁴

Fools have no interest in understanding, but delight in vomiting out their own opinions (18:2 NIV). The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, but the ear of the wise seeks knowledge (18:15 Hebrew). Rather than spending time taking in **wisdom**, **the fool** expresses ill-formed opinions. **A fool** would rather share from **his** lack of **knowledge** than work to gain **the knowledge** that's all around **him**. But the person with **discernment** seeks **knowledge**, and **wisdom** enters through **the heart** and **ear**. **The heart** is used in Hebrew as an expression for the mind, emotions, and will;

while **the ear** suggests that a **wise** person listens freely and frequently. Presumably, it is the mind, here, that seeks **knowledge**.³⁵⁵

When wickedness comes, contempt comes along with it, and with dishonor comes disgrace (18:3 ESV). This verse displays a progression set in motion by **wickedness**, which leads to **dishonor**. The second colon substitutes **dishonor**, a close synonym of **contempt**. And takes the thought a bit further by suggesting that **disgrace** should follow from the congregations of **God**. But, unfortunately, that isn't always the case. Sometimes a nation, community, or congregation (see the commentary on **Revelation Bf - The Church at Laodicea**) is so **wicked**, that **they** become welcomed members. **Malachi 2:9** describes how **Ha'Shem** made **the wicked priests dishonored and disgraced before the people. So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed My ways but have shown partiality in applying matters of the Torah.**³⁵⁶

Foolish speech (18:4-8): The words of the mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is like a bubbling brook (18:4 Hebrew). Who can accurately measure the benefits learned from **the words** of a godly teacher well versed in **the Scriptures**? How can we gauge the depth of comfort received from the words of a close friend during a period of grief or affliction? And what about those who told you about **Messiah**? Remember the encouragement you received from the Good News of **the Lord Yeshua**? Where would we be without caring, thoughtful people **speaking wisdom**. Stop and consider this: **Faith comes from hearing** only when words have been communicated the right message, in the right way, at the right time (**Romans 10:17**). In the second colon, **the babbling brook** suggests these **words of the mouth** are life giving.³⁵⁷ **Solomon's wisdom is a bubbling brook**, but **Yeshua** offers **streams of living water within** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Gp - On the Last and Greatest Day of the Feast**).

It is not good to show partiality to the wicked or to deprive the righteous of justice (18:5 ESV). This **proverb** supplements others that condemn the miscarriage of **justice**, adding the **injustice** of showing favoritism to **the wicked** at the expense of **the righteous** (**Proverbs 24:23; Exodus 23:3, 6-8; Leviticus 19:15; First Kings 21:9-13; Isaiah 1:23 and 10:2; Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 22:12; and Amos 5:12**). As recently as **17:23**, we observed a **proverb** that mentions one motive for **showing**

partiality to the wicked. They take bribes in secret to pervert the course of justice. Proverbs is interested in proper outcomes for **wicked** and **righteous** actions. The Torah forbids subverting **justice (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 10:17)**.³⁵⁸



A fool's words bring strife; yes, their mouths are asking for a beating (18:6 Hebrew). Quarrels, conflicts, rebukes, and accusations are at best a last resort for the wise, who try to turn away anger with a **gentle** or kind **word** (see **Cj - A Soothing Tongue is a Tree of Life**). But **fools** are those who are primed for an argument. So, **Solomon** gives us a few pieces of advice. First, we ought to maintain a bit of initial silence. When people are standing around the water cooler exchanging opinions on the news, the one who listens silently may be **the wisest (17:28)**. Those who only occasionally express an opinion, saving their opportunities for choice moments, are heard with greater interest than those who have no filter.³⁵⁹

A habit of silence will prevent many errors, for **sin is not stopped by many words, but the wise hold their tongues (10:19)**. **Proverbs** consistently teaches that fewer **words** are better than **many words**. **Those who control their tongue will have a long life; but those who speak rashly will come to ruin (13:3)**. **Even fools seem wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem pretty intelligent (17:28)**. **Words** are powerful and should be spoken **prudently (1:4a)**. The more one says, the

more likely that your **words** can be taken out of context, or even worse, that you can say something stupid or unwittingly offensive to others. The time and the situation must be right for **the words** that we **speak**. In addition, **Proverbs** teaches that our **words** must follow some reflection about **their** impact on others. **The heart of the righteous thinks before speaking, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil words (15:28).**³⁶⁰

A fool's mouth is his ruin; his lips are the snare of his soul (18:7 Hebrew). The moral of this observation is clear: **The speech of fools** brings **them** great harm. They say things that get them into trouble or into fights. **Wise speech** helps people get out of trouble; **foolish speech** plunges them deep into trouble. **The words of gossips are like choice morsels that sink deep into one's heart (18:8 Hebrew).** **Gossip** is spread to harm people, not to help them. Ultimately, gossip may turn out to be true, but that doesn't vindicate those who spread **it** to others. If true, then the report is being given to inappropriate people at an inappropriate time. Even though **it** is harmful, people often find **gossip** irresistible, and this **proverb** likens **gossip** to **fine food** that is hard to resist; but once eaten, **it** penetrates **deep into one's heart.**³⁶¹

Conclusion (18:9): A lazy person is as bad as someone who destroys things (18:9 NLT). A **lazy person** is destructive, not only to **himself**, but to society in general. So **Proverbs** warns against **laziness** (see **Be - Don't be Lazy**). **His destruction** may be indirect or slow in coming, but the end result is still ruin. When **he** does not work hard in **his** fields, tending **his** animals, which are vital to **his** very means of making a living, **his** crops rot and decay, and **his** animals languish just as surely as if someone had set out to plunder **them (Prov 6:15 and 24:34; Mt 12:30 and 25:14-30).** The observation is an implicit warning to work hard.

The righteous of the TaNaKh (18:10-11): Verses **10** and **11** are a **proverb** linked by **their** common theme and style. Both pertain to protection and security, the true security of **the righteous of the TaNaKh** versus the false security of **the rich in his wealth**. Both use the imagery of fortifications (**tower** and **city**). **The proverb** pair mobilizes **the wise** to seek protection in **ADONAI**, not in **wealth**. **The Name of ADONAI is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe (18:10 ESV).**³⁶² This verse sounds like it comes from **the Psalms**, with its declaration of the protection power of

ADONAI's Name, and thus, of **ADONAI Himself**. The second colon may describe the behavior of **the righteous person** as a way of determining whether one is **righteous** or not. **The rich think of their wealth as a strong defense; they imagine it to be a high city wall of safety (18:11 NLT)**. The deluded **rich** person's false security stands in striking contrast to **the righteous** person's true security **in God (Proverbs 11:28 and Isaiah 25:12)**. As **the righteous of the TaNaKh** trust in **ADONAI** for **their** protection, **the rich**, in **their** delusion, trust in **their riches**, imagining **their wealth** to be like **a strong city with a high wall (10:15)**. But this is not true. Only **ADONAI** can protect anyone from dangers.³⁶³

Janus (18:12): This **verse** is a janus, a literary term coming from the Roman god Janus, who was the god of beginnings, endings, and doorways. He is depicted with two faces, one looking to the past and one looking to the future. Therefore, **verse 12** draws **verses 10-11** to **their** conclusion, and begins the introduction of **verses 13-15**. As **15:33** brought its unit to a close, so this **proverb**, in which “**but humility comes before honor**” repeats **15:33** exactly, and brings the subunit of **18:1-11** to completion.³⁶⁴ **Before being ruined, a person's heart is proud; but humility comes before honor (18:12 Hebrew)**. **Pride** resists correction, and therefore **the proud** do not change **their** destructive behaviors and attitudes. Though **people** with **pride** think of **themselves** as being great, **they will be ruined by life**. On the other hand, **the humble** are open to correction and are more likely to achieve the kind of success that leads to **honor**. For similar teaching in **Proverbs**, see **16:18** and **15:33b** for repetitions of cola 1 and 2 respectively. For teachings about **humility** being the proper course in **life** see **11:2** and **29:33**.³⁶⁵

The wise person's behavior in conflict and his speech (18:13-21): The new unit no longer focuses on **the fool**, but on the handling of conflict and **speech**. **A wise person** is expected to uphold justice, resolve conflicts, and **speak** powerfully. The unit consists of an introduction, laying the foundation in being teachable (**18:13-15**), and then moving on to a courtroom scene to deal with settling disputes (**18:16-19**), and then to the power of **speech (18:20-21)**. The effect of **speech** is especially noticeable in the courtroom, where **the tongue has the power of life and death (18:21)**.

Introduction: The incorrigible fool versus the teachable wise

(18:13-15): The topics here follow the same sequence as **15:12-14**: **resenting correction (15:12 and 18:13)**, **a joyful heart** versus **a crushed**

spirit (15:13 and 18:14), and a discerning mind seeking knowledge (15:14 and 18:15). The connections suggest that **resenting correction** leads to a **crushed spirit** and loss of **life**, whereas the teachable person seeks **wisdom** and **knowledge**, which results in **life**.³⁶⁶

To answer someone before hearing him out is both stupid and embarrassing (18:13 CJB). This introductory **proverb** typically pertains to being teachable. Here, **the fool** rudely interrupts **the wise** before **he** is finished speaking to spout **his** own opinion. **The fool** doesn't listen or reflect on what **he** is hearing (also see **15:28, 19:2, 20:18** and **25, 21:5, and 29:20**). **They** have no filter and say whatever comes to mind, and what comes to their empty minds is particularly **stupid and embarrassing**. **Fools** babble all sorts of things that get **them** into trouble and earn **them** the reputation of being **stupid**, and in that way **they** are **embarrassed**.

The human spirit can endure a sick body, but who can bear a crushed spirit (18:14 NLT)? This **proverb** again (see **15:13** and **17:22**) makes an observation about the relationship between one's mental state and health of **the body**. To be sure, there is no strong body-soul dualism in the TaNaKh. The idea that a positive attitude can have a positive effect on a person's health is widely recognized even today, as well as the reverse idea that depression or anxiety (among the states of mind that could point to a **crushed spirit**) can worsen a person's physical condition.

The mind of a person with discernment gets knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge (18:15 CJB). It is **the wise** who grow in **knowledge**. One must have a predisposition to learn in order to actually learn something. There is nothing magical about it. **The proverb** assumes that teaching will come through listening to **the wisdom** of the teacher (**15:14a**).³⁶⁷

Teachings about justice and conflicts (18:16-19): The setting of **verses 16-19** is the courtroom, and its concern is settling disputes. **Verses 16-17** imply the need for an impartial judicial system by exposing **the bribe**, and **verses 18-19** present resolutions in light of the limitations of the best of courts.

A bribe (gift) can open doors; it gives access to great people (18:16 Hebrew). In this synthetic **proverb** (see [Ac - Proverbs from a Messianic](#)

Perspective: synthetic parallelism), the second line expands the information given in the first line. **The bribe** (Hebrew: *mattanah*) in **15:27**, though masculine (also see **21:14**), is a secondary variant form of the feminine *mattan*, to present a gift. In **Proverbs** these terms are used for patronages given for selfish interests or to gain an advantage over others. As the next **proverb** asserts, by **speaking first** and without **cross-examination**, he will unjustly appear in the right. **The first to speak in court sounds right, until the cross-examination begins (18:17 NLT)**. This **verse** protects **verse 16** against the misinterpretation that the disciple should **bribe** or **give gifts** to influence the outcome of his trial. Thus, this **proverb** teaches the need for an impartial judicial system by exposing **the bribe**, and instructs the disciple to hear both sides of an argument before making up his mind.

There was a limit to what the judicial courtroom of **verse 17** could achieve. **Casting lots** (see the commentary on **Exodus Gb - The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions**) **can end lawsuits; it settles disputes between powerful opponents (18:18 Hebrew)**. **The lot** was used to reveal **God's** selection of one of several possibilities where people were kept in the dark and needed an impartial verdict (**16:33**). When the guilty party could not be identified, **the lot** was used to isolate the offender and in that sense decide a person's guilt or innocence (**Joshua 7:14-18; First Samuel 14:40-42; Jonah 1:7**).³⁶⁸ **It is harder to win an offended brother than a strong city; arguments separate friends like a gate locked with bars (18:19 Hebrew)**. This observation is an implicit warning to avoid conflict because of the headstrong problems that will arise. The word **brother** may refer to a biological relationship or to a fellow believer. If an argument occurs in that relationship, it will be hard to break through to resolution because of hard feelings. **An offended brother** may shut down any possibility of restoring the relationship like **a strong city**, constructing **a gate locked with bars**. **Psalm 55** (especially **verses 12-14** and **20-21**) records **the psalter's** deep distress, and **the psalm** reflects **his** desire for the betrayer's destruction. **Psalm 133** provides the same sort of observation but from a positive perspective. **How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity (Psalm 133:1)**! If the conflict between **brothers** is on the rocks, then **unity** between **brothers** is unbelievably rewarding.³⁶⁹

Teachings about the power of speech (18:20-21): This unit's concluding **proverb** pair is bound together in several ways: by the notion of the certain

and abundant effects of **good** and **bad** speech, including **life and death**; by the agricultural metaphors of eating and being seated with **fruit** and with the harvest; and by the catchword **fruit**, the first word of **verse 20** and the last word of **verse 21**.

[With the] fruit of a man's mouth, his stomach will be satisfied; He will be satisfied with the product of his mouth (18:20 Hebrew). This **proverb** instructs the disciple that whatever he says to impact others will, in fact, fully impact him. It pictures one's words as something that people feed on, that influences behavior (**1:31, 8:19, 11:30, 12:14, 13:2, 31:16 and 31**), and that, in turn, determines his fate. What goes around comes around. **The tongue has power over life and death.** In a courtroom scene, it is obvious that **the tongue has the power over life and death.** But this merism also speaks of the relationship within the congregations of **God**, or a lack of it. The deadly **tongue** can disrupt the community (**James 3:1-8**) and by its lethal power isolates its owner from the community and kills him. The **life-giving tongue**, however, creates community by its vitality gives its possessor the full enjoyment of the abundant life within the community. The objective of the disciple may be **good**, producing **life (4:6, 8:17, 12:1, 13:24, 16:13, 22:11, and 29:3)**, or **bad**, producing **death (1:22, 8:36, 17:19, 20:13, and 21:17)**, but **those who indulge it must eat its fruit (18:21 CJB).**³⁷⁰

*Dear heavenly **Father**, **praise You** that **Your Word** is always 100% pure and right. Because **You** are holy, **Your Word** speaks of kindness and love. Those who trust and abide in **You** speak words of kindness, but those who have rejected **You** speak evil unkind words. **The good man from his good treasury brings forth good, and the evil man from his evil treasury brings forth evil. But I tell you that on the Day of Judgment, men will give account for every careless word they speak (Matthew 12:35-36).** **The tongue** though **small**, is very powerful. **See how so small a fire sets a blaze so great a forest! And the tongue is a fire. (James 3:5-6a).** Horses are controlled by bridles and **the tongue** must also be controlled so it speaks only words that honor **God (James 3:9-12).***

*The **wise** use of **the tongue** lifts up **praise** to **God** our **Father**. What a wonderful privilege it is to meditate on how wonderful **He** is. **I will rejoice greatly in ADONAI. My soul will be joyful in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me in a robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10a-b).** Praising keeps the focus on **God** and reminds me of **His***

enduring love. **Give thanks to ADONAI for He is good, for His mercy endures forever (First Chronicles 16:34).** When **the tongue** is used to **praise**, it brings comfort. **Praise** is the natural response to the joy I feel from recognizing the love of **God**. My heart overflows with adoration and gratitude for what **You** have done for me (**Second Corinthians 5:21**). A praising tongue, is like **offering God a sacrifice. Through Yeshua then, let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips giving thanks to His name (Hebrews 13:15).** Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and shalom in trusting, so you may overflow with hope in the power of the Ruach Ha'Kodesh (**Romans 15:13**). In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen