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How to Deal with the Fool

25:28 to 26:12

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.



Janus (25:28): A person with no self-control is like a city with broken-down walls (25:28 NLT). This verse is a janus, named after the Roman god of endings and beginnings, symbolized by having two faces - one looking back toward the past and one looking forward toward the future. Looking back, this **proverb** is connected with **25:27** by presenting a person prone to excess and a lack of self-control: **Just as it's not good to eat too much honey, it's also not good to seek out honors for yourself.** But looking forward, this **proverb** points to a collection of **proverbs** about **the fool** who is characterized by a lack of **self-control (12:16)**.

Introduction (26:1-3): Verse 1 summarizes the negative of the theme: **Honor is not fitting for a fool. Verse 2** functions as a comparison and a contrast with **verse 1. Verse 3** is the climax to the introduction and tells us that what is **fitting** for **the fool** is a **rod to his back**.⁴⁸⁵

Honor is no more fitting for a fool than snow with summer or rain with

harvest (26:1 Hebrew). In other words, **a fool** with **honor** is impossible. The summers in Judea are hot and dry. Harvest time is a time of no rain. **Fools** have no **honor**, or at least no **honor** that **they** deserve. Indeed, the comparison may imply that on the chance that **snow** came **in the summer** or **rain** at **harvest**, it would do great damage. After all, the only time in the Bible that **rain** came during **harvest** was through divine intervention, and when it came, it was a sign of divine judgment (**First Samuel 12:17-15**).

Like a fluttering sparrow or a flying swallow, an undeserved curse will not land on its intended victim (26:2 NLT). The ancient Near East knew curses that took on formal and ritualistic patterns. Even some in Isra'el may have been convinced that **a curse** worked merely because of the power of the words. This **proverb** would have been reassuring to a person that **undeserved curses** would really have no effect.⁴⁸⁶

Guide a horse with a whip, a donkey with a bridle, and a fool with a rod to his back (26:3 NLT)! The introduction now turns from what is not **fitting** to what is **fitting**. The object of the teaching is that **a fool** must be controlled by physical force. The point is that **the fool** is as difficult to manage as **a horse** or **a donkey**. Elsewhere, however, even **the rod** for discipline is seen to be fruitless when applied to **fools**. **They** are simply hell-bent on going in the wrong direction. By implication, then, **the fool** is a stupid **animal**. Neither **the fool** nor these **animals** respond to reason; therefore, **they** must be driven by **the whip, the bridle, or the rod.**⁴⁸⁷

Body (26:4-10): The composition's seven-verse body consists of two partial subunits: two statements that advocate correction as **fitting** for **the fool (verses 4-5)**, and five sayings, in the form of a chiasm, prohibiting **honor** for **the fool** because **he** is **unfit (verses 6-10)**.

Don't answer the foolish arguments of fools, or you will become as foolish as they are (**26:4 NLT**)! Be sure to answer the foolish arguments of fools, or they will become wise in their own estimation (**26:5 NLT**). Looking at the opening phrase of each verse, we see that there is a direct contradiction: **don't answer** versus **answer**. Liberal scholars see this as another example of the Bible contradicting itself. They suggest that **Proverbs**, gathered over many generations by men, is a mixture of **wisdom** sayings that reflect *human wisdom*, rather than *godly wisdom*. However, **ADONAI** was behind the process of inclusion of **wisdom** sayings in **Proverbs**, and **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** inspired **Solomon** to put all **his** human **wisdom** in the context of faith and service to **Ha'Shem**. The Bible teaches

that **all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (Second Timothy 3:16-17).**

A shallow interpretation that only sees a contradiction here misses the subtlety of **wisdom**. **Wisdom** sayings are just part of **wisdom**. Experience and insight are necessary to know how and when to apply different **wisdom** principles. For example, **Solomon** says: **A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a thorny branch in the hand of a drunk (26:9 NLT).**⁴⁸⁸ The **wise** person must discern when it is appropriate to **answer fools** according to **their folly** and when it would be harmful to do so. In this passage, **Solomon** shows both sides of the problem of answering **a fool** at all.⁴⁸⁹

When **a fool** boasts, says something in anger, or speaks as a know-it-all, the **wise** person has a choice to make. One response is to humble **the** boastful **fool** by boasting of greater qualifications. Anger from a fool could be answered with righteous anger in return. And a know-it-all might need a response that would put him to shame. Sometimes, one must answer in this way to keep the fool from thinking otherwise. Sometimes, **wise** people must do this either for themselves or for the sake of **the fool**.

Yet, the circumstances could change. If one were to respond to **a fool** on his own level, then one might look **foolish** to others. This would result in vindicating the fool in his own action. Key factors in deciding which course is **wiser** would include the relationship between **the wise** person and **the fool**, whether there are onlookers or not, and whether the fool in question might have any hope of learning from being humiliated.

One lesson we learn from the complexity of these **wisdom** principles is that we ought to be careful how we answer people. It is **wise** to become a student of people and learn how they might respond to us. We ought to think of justice, and also of their welfare in deciding how to answer. For **like apples of gold in a silver basket is a word appropriately spoken (25:11).**⁴⁹⁰

Hezekiah's editors outlined this chiasm by exactly repeating in its inner core: **A proverb in the mouth of a fool**, on either side of the pivot (**C**). Its outer core relates to hiring **the fool** for a job, one of which is asking **him** to send **a message**. The pivot is also the center verse of the chiasm and its conclusion, as if shouting out the big idea: to **honor a fool is unfitting.**⁴⁹¹

A. Committing important business to a fool: Trusting a fool to convey a message is like cutting off one's feet or drinking poison (26:6 NLT)! Sending a message by the hand of a fool is as bizarre as chopping off one's own feet and as deadly as drinking poison. Cutting off one's feet suggests that the message will never be delivered. Drinking poison may suggest that the one who sent the message will be harmed due to the incompetence of the fool. One can compare this warning about foolish behavior to **10:26: Lazy people irritate their employers, like vinegar to the teeth or smoke in the eyes.**⁴⁹²

B. A proverb in a fool's mouth: A proverb in the mouth of a fool is as useless as a paralyzed leg (26:7 NLT). Just as a person with paralyzed legs cannot use them, so a moral proverb in the mouth of a fool carries no authority and gets him nowhere. The proverb teaches us that it is inappropriate to educate the fool by putting proverbs in his mouth. Why would a fool wish to pay for wisdom when he has no desire to learn (17:16). The proverb's good message in the mouth of the flawed messenger falls flat on its face and makes no impact at all.

C. Honoring a fool: Honoring a fool is as foolish as tying a stone [boulder] to a sling (26:8 NLT). The pivot pokes fun at anyone who gives honor to a fool by explicitly comparing him to putting a large boulder in a sling. A sling was made of leather that had been broadened in the middle and into which a stone was placed (see the commentary on [the Life of David, to see link click AI - David Kills Goliath](#)). The person held the ends of the strip together and swung it until he let go of one of the ends so that the stone could fly against its intended target. Whoever gives honor to a fool looks as ridiculous (and is just as effective) as if he tried to sling a boulder from his sling.⁴⁹³

B. A proverb in a fool's mouth: A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a thorny branch in the hand of a drunk (26:9 NLT). We are asked how a thorny branch in the hand of a drunk is like a proverb in the mouth of a fool. As we contemplate the comparison, we conclude that it is saying something similar to 26:7. Thus, a fool may be able to learn a proverb, but won't be able to apply it to the right circumstance. While 26:7 points out that such a situation renders the proverb

ineffective, this one points out that it can actually be dangerous.⁴⁹⁴ **A thorny branch in the hands** of a person who doesn't know where **he** is going or what **he** is doing is like the proverbial gun in the hands of a child. **A proverb in the mouth of the wise** brings healing, but **in the mouth of a fool** only brings destruction.

A. Committing important business to a fool: Whereas **verses 7** and **9** reveal that **the fool** is **unfit** to utter any **proverb**, this **verse** shows **him unfit** for any kind of work. **An employer who hires a fool or a bystander is like an archer who shoots at random (26:10 NLT)**. Both in word (**verse 7**) and deed (**verse 9**), **he** inflicts damage. Anyone who hires **him** hires one who is as crazy and dangerous as a mass terrorist.

Conclusion (26:11-12): Verse 11 ridicules **the fool** as being incapable of saving **himself**, but **verse 12** speaks of the **hope** of **his** salvation. According to **verses 3-5**, **his hope** lies in physical punishment and **wise** answers. The catchphrase **wise in his own estimation** and the use of a direct address to the son in **verse 5** and **12** also point to the connection between these two **verses**. The conclusion matches the introduction (**verses 1-2**) and the pivot (**verse 8**), and poetically by returning to negative animal images: **fluttering sparrow** and **flying swallow (verse 2)**, **horse** and **donkey (verse 3)**, with the **dog** of **verse 11**.⁴⁹⁵

Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his foolishness (26:11 ESV). One of the characteristics of **fools** is **their** unwillingness to listen to corrections. **They** make mistakes, but since **they** will not listen to criticism, **they** are doomed to repeat those same mistakes over and over again. For this reason, **they** are compared to **a dog** that throws up and then **returns** and eats its **vomit**. The presumption is that **the dog** threw up because the food **it** ate didn't agree with **it**. In spite of that, however, **the dog** eats **it** again! **Second Peter 2:22** makes use of the first colon to refer to **false teachers** within the early Messianic community. **They** knew **the right way to live (2:21)** but then rejected **it**, thus returning to **their** old sinful, worldly lifestyle.

There is more hope for fools than for people who think they are wise (26:12 NLT). **Proverbs** make it clear from the start that the only true **wisdom** is **wisdom** from **God** (see **Ai - The Fear of ADONAI is the Beginning of Wisdom**). Human beings are not inherently **wise**, so it is the height of arrogance to think of oneself as being **wise (3:5** and **7, 27:1, 28:11** and **26)**. Humility, not pride, is the quality of **wise** people. The sad nature of this "pseudo-wisdom" is that there is less

hope for such people than for a **fool**. Now, one may well respond that **those** who **think they are wise in their own estimation** are **fools**; but here, **the proverb** is saying **they** are even worse than **fools**. See the similar structure in the **proverb** found in **29:20**.⁴⁹⁶

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for **Your** infinite perfect **wisdom** that allows us to know how to deal with a fool. But first, **Lord**, help me to know **Your Word** and learn how not to act foolish. Also **ADONAI**, please give me **wisdom** when dealing with **a fool**. Help me to act appropriately in every situation, with kindness if possible, while setting clear boundaries. Thank you for being such a wise and wonderful heavenly **Father**! In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*