

Dr. August Konkel, Proverbs, Session 16, Living with Fools, Proverbs 26, 6-min. Video Overview

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So, how do you deal with those difficult, just completely unreasonable people in your life? It's a problem as old as time itself. But what if some of the sharpest, most practical advice actually came from an ancient text? Ok, let's dive in, because today we're going to unpack a brilliant and surprisingly modern guide for navigating these exact situations, and it comes straight from the 26th chapter of the Book of Proverbs. Right out of the gate, this ancient chapter hits us with what looks like a massive contradiction.

I mean, get this: in two back-to-back verses, we get two commands that seem to completely cancel each other out. First, it says, do not answer a fool according to his folly. And then, literally the very next line says, answer a fool according to his folly.

Ok, so which one is it? What are we supposed to do? Do we engage, or do we walk away? Believe it or not, this little puzzle is the key to the whole chapter, and once we solve it, we get an incredibly powerful tool for our own conversations. So let's really unpack this contradictory command, because these two lines, sitting right next to each other, well, that's not a mistake, it's not a typo, it's actually a really sophisticated strategy for dealing with unwise, and frankly, frustrating behavior. But hold on, before we can solve the paradox, we have to get our definition straight.

We need to know what the text means by a fool, because I promise you, it's probably not what you're thinking. See, when Proverbs talks about a fool, it's not talking about someone's IQ; it's not about a lack of education. A fool, in this sense, is someone who actively scorns and rejects the very idea of wisdom.

It's an attitude, right, a posture of being closed off to truth, and it has nothing to do with how smart they are. And this is why that distinction is so critical. Because a fool can be highly educated; they can be incredibly intelligent, have tons of knowledge, even be in really prominent and respected positions.

This isn't about ignorance; it's about arrogance. Okay, so now that we know what we're talking about, let's see how this whole paradox actually works in the real world. A pretty famous intellectual debate from our own time gives us a perfect case study on how to use this ancient strategy.

So here are our players. On one side, we have the biologist Richard Dawkins, famous for his book, *The God Delusion*, and on the other, the theologian Alastair McGrath. What's so fascinating is that they're on completely opposite journeys.

Dawkins grew up Christian and became a fierce cynic, while McGrath started as a skeptic and became a Christian. So here's how McGrath perfectly applied both proverbs. First, he followed: do not answer a fool according to his folly.

He consistently refused to debate Dawkins one-on-one, basically saying it was pointless. But then he followed, answer a fool according to his folly, by writing a response called *The Dawkins Delusion*. You see, the book wasn't for Dawkins.

It was for the wider audience, to show them the flaws in the arguments. And there it is. That's the solution to the whole paradox.

The two commands are all about choosing your audience. You don't answer the person, the fool, because you'll just get dragged down into a pointless, frustrating argument. But you do answer the folly, the bad ideas themselves, for the sake of everyone else who's watching and listening.

You do it to clarify the truth for those who are actually open to it. Alright, so now we have the strategy, but how do you spot this kind of behavior in the wild? Well, the rest of the chapter basically acts like a field guide, pointing out other characteristics of folly so you know exactly when and how to apply this wisdom. One of the most vivid portraits in this field guide is the sluggard.

Now this isn't just about being a little lazy. The text paints a picture of someone who is defined by inertia, but who is also incredibly creative and energetic when it comes to one thing: making up excuses to avoid work. And the excuse the sluggard gives is just perfect in its absurdity.

He says, "Can't go outside; there's a lion in the street." It's hilarious, right? But it's also this razor-sharp illustration of someone who will invent the most wild, outlandish reason just to justify doing nothing. And the field guide keeps going.

It gives us more warning signs to watch for. The fool meddles in arguments that have nothing to do with them. They repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

They even misuse wise sayings to justify their nonsense. And they are totally unreliable. The proverb warns that sending a message with a fool is like cutting off your own feet.

Ouch. And from there, the chapter moves into one of the most serious aspects of folly, a place where strategy is absolutely crucial. It's the danger of deceitful speech, when words stop being about connection and start being used as weapons.

The text gives us this really powerful metaphor. It says flattering speech is like impure silver on a pot. Just picture that for a second: a cheap, worthless clay pot that's been coated with a thin, shiny layer of silver paint to make it look valuable.

It's all surface, hiding something cheap underneath. Now, to be clear, we're not talking about a genuine compliment here. This is about flattery as a tool for manipulation, saying exactly what someone wants to hear just to get a desired response, all while hiding what you really want.

The text is screaming at us: don't trust the shiny surface. And the text just lays out the destructive fallout: slander and gossip. They're like fuel being poured on a fire.

It warns that deep, burning hatred can be hiding right behind a deceptive, friendly smile. And then it makes this chilling observation. In the end, liars actually grow to hate the very people they abuse with their words.

So what's the core takeaway from this whole ancient guide? It all boils down to this. Responding with wisdom isn't about being the smartest person in the room or winning every argument. It's about being strategic.

It's about choosing your battles and, maybe even more importantly, choosing your audience. And that leaves us with one final thought to take with us. As you move through your day, through your work, your relationships, think about this ancient strategy in your life right now.

Who needs a different kind of answer? And who, maybe, just needs your silence?