

Proverbs: Living with Fools (Proverbs 26)

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Abstract

This lesson explores the character and behavior of fools as depicted in Proverbs 26, emphasizing that foolishness is defined not by a lack of intellect or education, but by an inherent rejection of true wisdom. Dr. August Konkel examines the delicate dilemma of when to answer or refrain from answering a fool, illustrating this concept through the public debate between Alistair McGrath and Richard Dawkins. The teaching further outlines the self-destructive and harmful traits of folly, including laziness, misuse of proverbs, contentious quarrel, and deceitful flattery. Ultimately, it highlights the dangerous impact of foolish actions on both individuals and society, reminding believers to examine their own tendencies.

Outline

I. Introduction to Fools in Proverbs 26

- A. Overview of Proverbs 26 as a chapter dedicated to the nature and ways of fools
- B. Distinction between lack of intelligence/education and moral/spiritual foolishness
 - 1. Fools can be highly educated, highly intelligent, and hold prominent positions
 - 2. Foolishness consists in doing the wrong things and scorning wisdom
- C. Inappropriateness of honoring a fool (Proverbs 26:1)
 - 1. Comparing honor given to a fool to snow in summer or rain at harvest
- D. Nature of empty threats and curses (Proverbs 26:2)
 - 1. Unearned curses carry no weight, like a fluttering sparrow or a swooping swallow
- E. Limits of coercion in controlling fools (Proverbs 26:3)
 - 1. Coercion may restrain behavior but cannot change character

II. The Paradox of Engaging with Fools (Proverbs 26:4–5)

- A. The Dual Commands
 - 1. Verse 4: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be as vain as him"
 - 2. Verse 5: "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he become wise in his own eyes"
- B. Practical Illustration: Alistair McGrath vs. Richard Dawkins
 - 1. Background of Richard Dawkins and biological reductionism (The God Delusion)

2. Alistair McGrath's response in *The Dawkins Delusion*

C. Application of Verse 4: Choosing Not to Argue Directly

1. Refusing direct debate with entrenched cynics when mind-change is impossible
2. Refusing to argue with enraged individuals reacting out of feeling betrayed

D. Application of Verse 5: Exposing Flawed Assumptions

1. Pointing out absurd premises for the benefit of an audience needing truth
2. Helping third-party listeners recognize misplaced trust in fallacious arguments

III. Characteristics and Dangers of Folly (Proverbs 26:6–16)

A. Fools as Unreliable and Dangerous Messengers (Proverbs 26:6)

1. Sending a message by a fool is like cutting off one's feet or drinking violence

B. Misuse of Wise Sayings (Proverbs 26:7, 9)

1. A proverb in a fool's mouth is as useless as the lame legs of a cripple
2. A proverb in a fool's mouth is like a thornbush in the hand of a drunkard

C. Giving Honor or Position to a Fool (Proverbs 26:8, 10)

1. Giving honor to a fool is like tying a stone in a sling

D. Persistence in Stupidity (Proverbs 26:11–12)

1. As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats their folly
2. Self-conceit: More hope for a fool than for one wise in their own eyes

E. The Character of the Sluggard (Proverbs 26:13–16)

1. Fabrication of absurd excuses to avoid responsibility ("lion in the street")
2. Extreme inertia and laziness (turning on a bed like a door on hinges)
3. Indolence reaching the point of refusing even to feed oneself
4. Arrogance of believing oneself wiser than seven decision-makers

IV. Destructive Interpersonal Behaviors (Proverbs 26:17–28)

A. Contentiousness and Meddling (Proverbs 26:17)

1. Interfering in others' quarrels is like grabbing a stray dog by the ears

B. Deceitful and Fraudulent Speech (Proverbs 26:18–19)

1. Deceiving a neighbor and claiming "I was only joking" is like a madman throwing firebrands

C. Slander, Whispering, and Quarreling (Proverbs 26:20–22)

1. Without wood, fire goes out; without a whisperer, contention ceases
2. A contentious person kindles strife like charcoal kindles embers

D. Flattery and Concealed Hatred (Proverbs 26:23–28)

1. Insincere compliments like impure silver glaze over clay pottery
2. Deceitful speech hiding malice beneath pleasant words
3. Ultimate self-destruction: Laying traps and rolling stones that catch the perpetrator

4. Lying tongues hating their victims and flattering mouths working ruin

V. Conclusion and Self-Examination

A. Pondering the pervasive tendencies of folly

B. Recognizing that all individuals have potential tendencies toward foolishness