

Sermon 89, Profiles in Folly #6, Proverbs 25:28-26:12

Proposition: The Wise Son reveals His wisdom by diagnosing, exposing, and responding to folly.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we return this evening to our Proverbs series. This marks the 89th sermon I've delivered to you on this glorious book. And it just keeps getting better. Allow me to remind you once again of the main point here. Proverbs is a book that tells us how Jesus thinks. It is a depiction of the wise son, not in terms of his biography (that's the Gospels) or his place in God's plan for the world (that's the epistles, prophets, and history books), but in terms of how he thinks, acts, and processes life. Thus, far from a random collection of aphorisms, Proverbs presents the character of Jesus the Wise Son, and repeatedly depicts that character in contrast with its opposite, the character of folly or contempt of God. The present chapter is the second chapter of the collection created by Hezekiah's men during the 700s B.C. when that godly man ruled in Judah. It presents seven kinds of fool. Again, where's the gospel here? Where is the good news about Jesus? It is present in the implications. Negatively, the chapter depicts fools, and the lion's share of that goes to the regular fool who is described in the first twelve verses. But positively, the chapter is urging us to see that the wise son is not like that. The god-fearing man is not like that. Jesus reveals His wisdom here by diagnosing, exposing, and responding to folly.

I. The Root Problem: A Lack of Self-Control, 25:28

Our text contains its own introduction, a single verse that heads the collection of sayings on fools. What is it that all seven kinds of fool have in common? They are all lacking in self-control. You know, self-control is so important, yet we don't have a one-word antonym for it. You can

call its opposite self-uncontrol. You can call it being out of control. You can call it rage, passion, or being dominated. But whatever you term it, the reality is a major underlying problem found across the spectrum of folly. Fools lack self-control. That's true for the lazy, for the gossip, for the regular fool that we'll discuss in just a second, and for the other kinds of fool discussed in ch. 26.

What happens when you don't have self-control, when you lack the ability to tell yourself no? Well, Solomon compares that situation to be a city broken and without walls. This image is not immediately intuitive for us, since none of us live in a walled city. We understand what a broken-down city is, though. Picture roads blocked, houses ruined, power lines down, and stores boarded up. Is a city in that condition a great place to live? Of course not. No one wants to live in a ruined house. No one wants to live in a ruined house that's surrounded by lots of other ruined houses. And no one wants to live in a whole city that's ruined. Now add to that the symbolism of the wall. The wall was a major tool of defense in those days. Not having a wall would be the equivalent of CIA agents not using passwords on their work computers. It would be the equivalent of city hall having no locks on the doors. It would be the same idea as the Bank of Gillette keeping all their deposits stacked neatly on the sidewalk. Right? A wall is the first line of defense for any pre-modern city. Human beings can't easily penetrate walls. Now, artillery can, and aircraft especially have rendered walls irrelevant. But we are all familiar with the concept. A city with no walls is a sitting duck. A city with no walls has very little protection. A city with no walls can be invaded before it knows what's happening. It is completely vulnerable to external threats. We could say then, that lack of self-control is to the moral and spiritual life what AIDS is to the physical life. Someone with AIDS can die of the common cold because he has no immune system left. If you don't have self-control, then you are completely vulnerable. Anything and everything can ravage you, rob you blind, or destroy you.

I remember showing my great-grandmother the Internet for the first time in the mid-2000s. She saw one of those blinking ads that said "Congratulations! You are the 1,000,000th visitor to this site. You have won an iPhone!" And she got excited. As I endeavored to scroll on past, she's like "No, Caleb! We won!"

If you have no self-control, you'll buy anything, believe anything, do anything or not do anything just based on how you feel at that exact second. And of course, because we are creatures whose feelings follow their actions, you never feel like working until you start working. You never feel like working out until you've been doing it for twenty minutes. You never feel like worshipping God until you're already in the thick of it. And so it goes. Without self-control, brothers and sisters, you are the victim of spiritual AIDS.

How do you get self-control? Proverbs doesn't tell us in the verse. Ultimately, we know that self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit. You get self-control by having the Holy Spirit in your life. And how does that happen? It happens when you fear God and undergo the discipline of wisdom. Essentially, you get self-control by pursuing personified wisdom. And when you

meet Him, you then learn internalized wisdom. When you have that, you're like a flourishing city, no longer vulnerable to every whim and enemy.

II. Exhibit A: The Fool, vv. 1-12

Well, ch. 26 begins with a dozen verses on the fool. He is exhibit A in the group of people who have no self-control and who are therefore subject to whatever enemy, foreign or domestic, wants to take them over.

A. Fools Don't Fit, vv. 1-3

The first point the wise son (or should I say, the Father) makes to us about the fool is that the fool doesn't fit. These verses deploy the concept of "fittingness" or appropriateness. What is seemly? What is correct for the situation?

1. Good Shouldn't Come to Bad, v. 1

Well, one thing is clear: Honor is not fitting for a fool. To show a fool respect, to magnify and elevate his social position, is unfitting, unseemly, and inappropriate. It is every bit as inappropriate as snow in summertime. We all know that it doesn't snow in the summer. The weather is warm, and snow stays away. Snow just doesn't fit. And rain doesn't fit in harvest time. In the Mediterranean climate that Israel enjoys, it pretty much rains only in winter and spring, and then is sunny throughout the summer and fall. Of course, rain is not only rare in the fall there; rain hampers harvest. If it's too wet in the fields, you can't get out and get the crops. Sometimes too much rain delays harvest so long the crop is lost. That's not a good situation.

How could we be guilty of honoring fools? We can share their social media posts. We can vote in pastors, elders, and deacons in the church who are not responsible and capable of handling those positions well. We can engage in romantic relationships with fools. Ladies, you could take that new boyfriend and if things get serious, you could turn him into a father. Fatherhood is an honorable position, and you might give it to him. Would that be fitting? Is this guy suitable for such a position of honor? As parents or teachers, we can honor folly in our children or students. As bosses, we might honor folly in our employees. Don't do it! Yes, you need to respect the humanity of every person, fools included. But you definitely must not reward, encourage and honor their folly.

2. Bad Won't Come to Good, v. 2

The next verse tells us not to fear curses. They don't land without reason, any more than a bird does. This verse used to puzzle me to no end. What does a curse have in common with a sparrow or a swallow? The answer is found in the context. All three of these verses draw on the concept of fittingness. Honor is unfitting for a fool. Landing in an unsuitable place is unfitting for a bird. And landing on a good person is unsuitable for a curse.

We don't fear curses. But in many parts of the world, people live in fear of being cursed by the local witch doctor, voodoo practitioner, etc. They live in fear of this because those curses can do very bad things to them. I just heard a testimony last night from a Christian woman who grew up Hindu in India. While she was a Hindu, her family was placed under a curse that, she believes, ended up with her being possessed by three demons. Curses are all too real. Yet this

verse explains that though they are real, they should not terrify us. Brothers and sisters, we don't need to fear curses — not because the Enlightenment is correct that curses are always imaginary, but because a curse can't fall on someone who doesn't deserve it.

3. Bad Will Come to Bad, v. 3

However, on someone who does deserve them some pretty significant penalties will fall. This verse is not about clothing (only fools wear stripes; ha ha!), but rather about the reality that folly makes you like an animal who only understands brute force. This is fitting. The verse is not telling you that you need to beat your animals, or that you personally are responsible to beat up fools. It's simply stating that horses and donkeys oftentimes get beaten because they don't do what they're told — and fools get beaten for the same reason.

B. Fools Can't Be Ignored, vv. 4-5

The passage goes on to say that you and I do need to respond to folly— not by beating up fools, as appealing as that might sometimes be, but by using our words.

1. It's Dangerous to Respond to Folly, v. 4

The first member of this notorious pair tells us that the danger in speaking to a fool is that you will end up being foolish yourself. To answer a fool according to his folly is to speak to him in terms he understands. If you do that, you will be speaking like a fool, and to speak like a fool is to be a fool. You don't want to be a fool. So don't even talk as though you don't fear God.

2. It's Necessary to Respond to Folly, v. 5

But that said, it is necessary to respond to folly. You do have to answer a fool, and even answer him in terms he can understand, in order to show him that he is not as smart as he thinks he is. Notice that the verses don't begin with the word "rebuke." They begin with the word "answer." You are not supposed to go around seeking out fools and telling them why they're wrong in ways they can understand. Far from it. But if a fool addresses you, you need to respond. If he's asking you something, answer him. Speak up! The goal of your interaction is to stop him from descending into the lowest pit of folly, described here and in v. 12 as being wise in one's own eyes. That situation is worse than ordinary folly. As we know, ignorance (ordinary folly) is a problem — but false knowledge (what you do know that ain't so; i.e., being wise in your own eyes) is much worse. And so when a fool engages you in conversation, and wants an answer, it is important that you not play along and let him think that he is indeed smart.

Now, for some of us this sounds like a dream world. "I can call out fools every time one talks to me? Hot dog!" For others, this sounds impossible. "I have to answer fools and endeavor to make sure that they can't walk away thinking that they are really smart? I could never in a million years do that!"

Brothers and sisters, I want to point out two things here. First off, identifying fools is not a procedure that you can perform in isolation from the rest of the Christian life. Unless you fear God yourself, you won't be able to tell whether someone else fears him. Remember, the bottom line of folly is that it is a lack of fearing God. Someone who doesn't fear God is a fool. It's not your responsibility to cure folly. But you have to say what you can to endeavor to not let it get

worse. Don't affirm folly. Don't say "It's acceptable to not fear God. In fact, I think it's rather smart."

And this is where the second consideration comes in. If we've learned anything from Proverbs, we have learned about the hot line from the heart to the mouth. Everything that you say comes from your heart. And here's the thing: If your heart fears God and cares about His approval, then you will love your neighbor as yourself. That doesn't mean you will always be nice; niceness is not a virtue. Kindness is. Tough love is. If you want to be able to say what the fool who's talking to you needs to hear, don't work on your one-liners. Work on your heart.

A final thing: Answering a fool will be complicated. You will probably feel that you said something too foolish and that you didn't say enough overall. After all, those are the two dangers these proverbs warn about. But if you work on your heart, training it to fear God and be wise, you will know what to say. Look at the Lord Jesus. He did that. He never let a fool leave puffed up with pride — but He never was cruel either. He is the wise son. As you spend time with Him, you will become like Him.

C. Fools Can't Be Trusted, vv. 6-10

The next verses are centered on v. 8, and warn against giving honor to the fool. Notice how both vv. 6 and 10 talk about giving the fool a job, and vv. 7 and 9 talk about a fool trying to deploy a proverb successfully. It doesn't work. Don't hire a fool. Don't expect a fool to speak wisdom.

I want to talk for a moment about these two warnings against proverbs in the mouth of fools. This book has already said it, but it bears repeating: knowing Proverbs doesn't automatically give you wisdom. Just saying the wise words of someone else when you are a fool yourself won't make you wiser, impress others with your wisdom, or make your life better. Solomon said at the beginning that it's about the heart. Does your heart fear God? If not, then at worst you're going to hurt people by banging them over the head with Scripture, hitting them with a spiky thornbush of proverbs, or, as my aunt once said, standing outside the door of their hospital room and handing in verses.

Brothers and sisters, I've told you before about my wife's friend who resisted reading Proverbs in family worship because her mother had beaten her up verbally with too many proverbs too many times. That kind of thing is exactly what these verses are warning about. A proverb is lame if it doesn't come out of a God-fearing mouth. A proverb is hurtful and prickly if it doesn't come directly from a God-fearing heart.

So what do you and I need to do? Stop quoting proverbs? That's not the answer. The answer is to learn to fear God. Then proverbs will be a blessing in our mouths. Then the wisdom they have to offer will actually be apparent to those who listen to us.

In the middle of the chiasm is a warning against honoring fools. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. When you deploy a proverb without fearing God and keeping that proverb yourself, you are a hypocritical fool, and your use of the proverb will only put your target off, making him or her lose all desire to fear God. You are not honoring God by quoting proverbs when you don't fear Him. You're actually honoring fools. And that's something you shouldn't

do. It's as stupid as loading a sling but making it so that the stone can't fly out — the equivalent of squeezing the trigger of a loaded rifle that has three inches of dirt stuffed into the business end of the barrel. It's not going to end well. Allow me at this point to say that we have honored so many fools with public office in this country for so long that the results are all around us.

D. Fools Are Incurable, v. 11

Well, fools can't be corrected. False teachers are one species of fool. They return to their vomit, going back and licking it up again and again, as Peter points out (2 Peter 2). But they are not the only kind of fool that does this. When you don't fear God, you don't recognize your purpose as a human being. And so you think that things your body rejects (such as vomit) might actually be good for you. Things God warns are harmful, you in your infinite wisdom embrace with redoubled vigor.

E. Fools Are Surpassed in Folly by the Self-Conceited, v. 12

But as bad as all this is, fools are surpassed in folly by one particular kind of person: the self-conceited. This is the person who is so impressed with his own prowess, intelligence, etc. that there is no talking to him. As bad as the fool is, he could be converted and learn to fear God. There is hope for that. (Which, incidentally, is part of why you must not leave a conversation with a fool allowing him to descend into this "wise in his own eyes" thing.) But that hope lessens a great deal when you come to the person who is so stuck on himself. Don't be that person. Look at Jesus, who was literally the greatest human being the world will ever see. He did talk about Himself, and He even talked about Himself regularly. But I don't think He did it excessively. I don't read the gospel accounts and think "narcissist." And you don't either. Jesus knew that He feared God and that He was the Wise Son. But He was not wise in His own eyes. He asked questions and listened to the answers rather than telling people what their answers were. (OK, sometimes He did tell people what their answers were, but only when He already knew.)

Brothers and sisters, learn from Jesus how to handle fools. Above all, don't be a fool yourself. Don't be wise in your own eyes. Don't use proverbs when you don't fear God. He is enough. When you fear Him and spend time with Him, you will be wise, and you will respond to fools well. Amen.