

How to Answer the Wisdom of Fools

Proverbs 26:4-5

Sunday, July 12, 2020

A typical story has two main characters: the hero and the villain. It may have supporting characters, but the plot tends to revolve around a protagonist and an antagonist. Think of Dorothy and the Wicked Witch, Batman and the Joker, Harry Potter and Voldemort. This is true not only of works of fiction but also of true stories. Last weekend, many people finally watched the musical *Hamilton*, a story about the man on the ten-dollar bill and his nemesis, Arron Burr.

We have been working our way through the book of Proverbs, a book full of wisdom and warnings. Perhaps along the way you've met Proverbs' two main characters without even knowing it. These two are not so much characters as they are representatives of character qualities. A few weeks ago, Pastor Jerry introduced us to these two in the opening verses of the book.

“Let **the wise** listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance— for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of **the wise**. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but **fools** despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:5-7, NIV).

If the wise person is the hero, then the villain must be the one that Proverbs refers to as *the fool*. Look at how Solomon describes the fool in the verse I just read: fools *despise* wisdom and instruction. This whole book is devoted to helping God's people *gain* wisdom and *receive* instruction, but the fool wants none of that. In fact, later in the opening chapter, we read that “fools *hate* knowledge” (1:22). The fool rejects the notion that God has anything of value to say as to how he should live his life. Fools despise wisdom.

So what should we do when we find ourselves drawn into a foolish argument? What wisdom does Proverbs have for us in how we should interact on social media? How should we respond when a friend says something a bit off-color? How should a wise person speak to someone who is engaged in gossip or slander? In other words, what does Scripture say about how a wise person should respond to a fool?

Before we look for the answer in the passage that was read earlier, it will be helpful to consider more of what Proverbs has to say about the *fool*. First, as harsh as the term may sound, calling someone a fool is not intended as an insult. A fool literally is someone who acts, behaves, or thinks in a foolish manner. It's not just that the fool lacks wisdom, rather, the fool actively despises wisdom and rejects godly instruction. They might not appreciate the label, but by definition, one who rejects wisdom and who embraces foolishness is called a fool.

Second, describing someone as a fool is not meant to be a commentary on that person's level of education or a lack of intelligence. The book of Proverbs can at times refer to someone as *simple*, but that has more to do with immaturity, such as a child in need of parental instruction. The fool isn't dimwitted, he's obstinate. The fool doesn't need to grow up, read a book, or take a class. He needs to wise up, receive correction, and listen to godly rebuke.

If we had more time, we could take a more comprehensive look at the fool in the book of Proverbs, but for now, let me summarize what Scripture says about the character of a fool. First, the fool is **delusional**. Last month Pastor Albin turned our attention to Proverbs 3 where we read,

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:5-6, NIV).

In the very next verse, the command continues:

“Do not be **wise in your own eyes**; fear the Lord and shun evil” (3:7).

That same phrase appears throughout the book. For example, we read in Proverbs 12:15 (ESV),

“The way of a fool is **right in his own eyes**, but a wise man listens to advice.”

That's what I mean when I say that a fool is *delusional*. He defines wisdom as what is wise or right in his own eyes. The fool doesn't seek God's way, she pursues her own.

Sinful men and women have been pursuing this foolish way of wisdom from day one. Doing what was right in their own eyes was what got Adam and Eve into trouble in the first place. You might remember the story from Genesis 3:

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and **pleasing to the eye**, and also **desirable for gaining wisdom**, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Genesis 3:1-7, NIV).

Fools don't fear the Lord. Fools are delusional. They lean heavily on their own understanding and pursue what is wise in their own eyes.

Second, fools are divisive. In the book of Proverbs, division not only follows the fool, the fool creates it. The fool thrives on disunity. Proverbs 20:3 says,

“It is to one’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.”

He has no interest in peace and resolution, rather, as Proverbs 29:9 (ESV) says,

“If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet.”

Divisiveness is, of course, not just an Old Testament problem. The Apostle Paul once instructed his friend Titus,

“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned” (Titus 3:10–11, NIV).

The problem with a person who is deluded into thinking that his way is always right and who fosters division wherever he goes is that that, third, fools are destructive. Fools leave behind a path of destruction by their words and their works. Proverbs 17:27 (NIV) says,

“A scoundrel plots evil, and on their lips it is like a scorching fire.”

Or listen to what it says about the fool in Proverbs 12:18 (NIV),

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Whoever coined the rhyme “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” must not have had many interactions with fools. So let’s ask the question again, how should we respond when we meet a fool? How should we engage when we encounter foolish arguments?

God’s people need wisdom to know how to rightly respond to a fool. And for that wisdom, let’s look at Proverbs 26:4–5 (NIV):

“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.”

What’s the first thing you notice about those two statements? They sound contradictory, don’t they? One seems to suggest that we not answer a fool, but the other seems to indicate that we should. Was Solomon contradicting himself? I think there is a reason why we find these two statements back to back. I think they are meant to be understood together.

You'll notice that these two statements share a common phrase. We are either to answer or not answer a fool *according to his folly*. Even though the phrase is the same in both verses, there is good reason to believe that the sense depends on the meaning of the rest of the verse. Notice also that both statements include a warning. Failure to rightly respond to a fool can actually make things worse.

At this point, with all the potential risks involved, you might wonder if there is any reason to respond to a fool at all. Perhaps the wisest course of action is to avoid arguing with a fool altogether. Consider the Apostle Paul's advice to Timothy:

"Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales" (1 Tim. 4:7a, NIV).

"Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20b, NIV).

"Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly" (2 Tim. 2:16, NIV).

"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels" (2 Tim. 2:23, NIV).

One of the big risks that come with responding to fools is that we in turn might respond with foolishness. Our proverb warns us,

"Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him" (Prov. 26:4, NIV).

Let's be honest, in our quest for a quality response, do we not sometimes sink down to the fool's level in order to sling mud right back in our opponent's face? Think back one of your most recent debates, arguments, or spit-spats. Who won? Who won in your mind? In your back and forth, were you more concerned with righteousness or with being right in your own eyes? Were you looking to win your brother or sister, or were you so focused on winning that unity went out the window? Did you keep the moral high-ground or did you manage to get in a few low blows?

Brothers and sisters, the wisdom and warnings of Proverbs were not given to us to help separate saints from sinners. These were given to lead sinners like you and me to see our own foolishness and our need for a savior. Beware of the fact that answering a fool according to his folly might reveal that we ourselves are fools just like him.

No one handled foolish arguments better than the Lord Jesus. When considering how to answer a fool, we would do well to look at Jesus's example. Matthew records a series of interactions between Jesus and his enemies in chapters 21 and 22. We don't have time to turn there and examine these in detail, but Pastor Jerry, if you're watching this

live stream, I'm just saying there's enough here for a good 8-week sermon series. We have time for just one example.

On one occasion a group of religious leaders called Jesus out while he was teaching in the temple courts. Even though they came to Jesus with a question, it's clear they weren't looking for an answer. In their minds, Jesus was no more than an unauthorized cult leader. He had not gotten the green light from them, and since his teaching didn't mirror theirs, they were sure his credentials did not come from God. So with the intent of leading Jesus to step on to a theological land mine they asked,

“By what authority are you doing these things? ...And who gave you this authority?” (Mt. 21:23b, NIV).

They were asking Jesus to show them his teaching license, convinced in their minds that he had no such authorization.

Listen now to how Jesus responded to these fools. Not a hint of snark or arrogance. Not a whiff of self-promotion. He's no bully, but he won't be bullied.

“Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn't you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We don't know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (Mt. 21:24-27, NIV).

Let's not presume that Jesus's response is a kind of messianic mic-drop. His intent was not to shame them or to throw shade. But he did want to expose their thinking for what it was: the wisdom of fools. Jesus was in a sense saying, “You have your answer right in front of you, yet you refuse to believe.” Jesus was willing to answer the question if asked in faith, but he refused to respond to them according to their folly. The entrapping questions didn't end there. Read on in Matthew 21-22 and you will see more of Jesus's wise responses to foolish arguments.

But we need to return to our proverb. What about verse 5? If verse 4 is warning us about the risk of answering a fool, verse 5 seems to be warning us of the danger of remaining silent. Proverbs 26:5 (NIV) says,

“Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.”

There's that phrase again: *wise in his own eyes*. Wisdom says that it is good to answer a fool, lest the foolish person perceives that our silence equals our approval. To say

nothing might give him the impression that what he deems right in his own eyes is indeed right.

So which is it? Should we answer a fool or shouldn't we? Should I ignore that social media post or angry email, or should I craft a response? Should I raise my objection in my Life Group or my bible study, or should I let sleeping dogs lie? Is this one of those spousal debates where I should be ready with my rebuttal, or should I simply say, "I hear you" and move on? How does the wisdom of Proverbs relate to the wisdom of James who said,

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (Jas. 1:19-20, NIV).

I can't advise you in one sermon on how to apply these proverbs to every foolish argument you will encounter. But I can tell you this: the wisdom of God's word will equip you for every conversation, with friend and fool alike. Is that not what Paul said to Timothy?

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV).

I'm not suggesting that your study of Scripture will give you the zinger you're looking for to win every debate. That's not what the Bible is designed to do. What it is designed to do is to provide us with the wisdom of God for life and salvation. And when we turn to Scripture with the fear of the Lord and with teachable hearts, the wisdom of God will always point us to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Folks, **the wisest way to respond to a fool is to resolve to preach the gospel.** I want us to look at one last cross-reference before we wrap things up this morning. It's a longer passage, but if you'll indulge me, after I've read it I'll just make a couple of brief comments and then we'll finish our time in the Scriptures together. In the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul addresses this subject of wisdom and folly. I won't put the passage on the screen, but if you would like to turn there you will find this passage in 1 Corinthians 1 beginning in verse 18.

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and

foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5, NIV).

The only hope for a deluded, divisive, and destructive fool is the cross of Jesus Christ. The only way to rescue someone from what is right in their own eyes is by pointing them to Christ the Righteousness One. Only a fool believes that he or she possesses wisdom enough to address the issues of government and politics, race and gender, wealth and poverty, health and safety, marriage and family, societal values and social justice, science and technology, or even philosophy and religion apart from the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Resolve to preach the gospel. Preach the gospel not only to the fools you meet, but also to the fool in the mirror. There is no power to transform foolish hearts apart from the powerful message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Folks, let’s resolve that when we aim to answer a fool, that the answer we give is grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ.