

## PROVERBS 26 FOOLS, SELF-CONCEIT, AND SLOTHFULNESS

### **A fool – answer him or not? (verses 4-5)**

*“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.”*

We are here forbidden, and yet also commanded, to answer a fool! The reason, however, that is attached to each rule explains the seeming contradiction. Both verses together form a wise directory for the treatment of a fool – according to the difference of character, time, or circumstance.

Imagine a “free-thinker” or scoffer at religion; he shows the desperate folly of his heart by making a mock at sin, by witty and profane jestings, or by erroneous arguments against the Word and ways of God. With such a person, generally speaking, it would be better to follow Hezekiah’s command against Rabshakeh’s blasphemy: “Answer him not!” Jeremiah thus turned away in silence from the folly of the false prophets of his day. However, if we are constrained to reply to such a fool, we must “answer him not according to his folly” – that is, not in his own foolish manner, and “not rendering railing for railing.”

Sometimes it may be our duty to restrain our mouth. But at other times, and under different circumstances, it may be no less our duty to speak. Silence may sometimes be mistaken for defeat. Unanswered words may be deemed unanswerable, and this may lead the fool to become even more arrogant and more wise in his own conceit. An answer, therefore, may sometimes be called for – yet not an answer *in* folly, but *to* folly. It must not be in the fool’s own foolish manner, but in the manner which his foolishness requires.

Let us pray for wisdom to govern our tongue; to discover “the time to keep silence, and the time to speak”; and most of all, to suggest the “word fitly spoken” for effective reproof! And in all of these things, how instructive is the pattern of our Lord Jesus Himself! His silence and His answers were equally worthy of Himself. The former always conveyed a dignified rebuke, and the latter resulted in the confusion of His contentious enemies. Surely a prayerful study of Jesus’ words will communicate to us a large measure of His Divine Wisdom!

### **A man wise in his own conceit (verse 12)**

*“Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him.”*

Do you see this man? God is here pointing at him. There is something to be learned from him. He castles himself up in his own conceit. He is fit to be made an example, for the false persuasion that he has gained wisdom utterly prevents him from gaining it! He thinks himself wise because he does not know what it means to truly be wise. His wisdom is “science falsely so called.” He has yet to learn the first lesson in the Lord’s school – namely, his own folly, which is a lesson that cannot be learned without severe exercise. There is more hope of



a fool, who knows himself to be one. The natural fool has only one hindrance: his own ignorance. But the conceited fool has two: ignorance and self-delusion.

This was our Lord's cutting reproof to the conceited Pharisees: "The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of heaven before you." This was His charge against the Laodicean church: "Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not, that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked!" The reckless fool who runs into all "the excesses of riot" is more open to conviction of sin than the person who prides himself upon his well-mannered religion. The heart's language of such a proud man runs thus: "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are!" And his haughty rule with his fellow-sinners is, "Stand by thyself, I am holier than thou!"

O Lord Jesus! Preserve us from this hopeless delusion! Pull down all our pride and imaginary wisdom. Take the scales away from our eyes, so that we may know what we truly are in Your sight; and clothe us with genuine humility!

### **Diligent action is necessary (verse 16)**

*"The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason."*

Such is the strange union of self-complacency with folly! This worthless being – a mere "cumberer of the ground" – prides himself upon his "superior wisdom." Since he does not take the trouble to think, he sees none of the difficulties that are obvious to a thinking mind; and he arrives with speed at the most unreasonable conclusions. Any wise man could give a reason for his convictions and beliefs, but this slothful person is wiser in his own conceit than them all!

In how many striking ways is the sin of sloth presented in the Book of Proverbs! It would be good for us to examine ourselves and see in what way we are influenced by it – bodily, mentally, or spiritually. Does it ever follow us throughout our work, or in our prayers, or during our Bible reading? May the Lord enable us to resist this paralysis in every shape, for our life's work needs to be done with full purpose of heart.



It is good if the slumberer is a little roused, but it is far better if his eyes are fully opened. Active, simple faith carries us onward – even in the faces of the lions in the way, which seem to stand open-mouthed to devour us. It is a special mercy to realize the holy war that we are engaged in as we travel toward Zion!

That is why John Bunyan put his family of pilgrims under the conduct of brave Mr. Greatheart – for their encouragement and their protection. Heaven will never be won by folded arms; active diligence and zealous effort are required in order to take it by force!

*Lord, we confess that we are naturally wise in our own conceits. We beseech You to pull down our pride and imaginary wisdom, and clothe us with humility. Amen.*