

PROVERBS 26: Selected Verses

¹Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
so honor is not fitting for a fool.

⁸It is like binding a stone in a sling
to give honor to a fool.

⁴Do not answer fools according to their folly,
lest you be a fool yourself.

⁵Answer fools according to their folly,
lest they be wise in their own eyes.

¹²Do you see people wise in their own eyes?
There is more hope for fools than for them.

¹⁸Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows,
¹⁹so is one who deceives a neighbor
and says, "I am only joking!"

²³Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel
are smooth lips with an evil heart.

1,8 - Let's begin with some definitions. What does it mean to be a "fool"? A fool is the opposite of one who is wise. While the more common understanding of a fool is one who lacks good sense, is thoughtless and lacks intelligence, a deeper understanding in this chapter of Proverbs is that a fool is a narcissist. What is a narcissist? Someone who is totally self-absorbed with their own needs, wants, and cravings for recognition and admiration, and totally ignorant and oblivious of the needs of anyone else. Narcissists also believe they are worthy of all the attention and praise because they are great in their own eyes, and greater than anyone else. They are never wrong, they are truly smart and wise, and they must always win whether it's a petty argument or some greater undertaking which becomes a competition. Sound like anyone you know?

OK, with this kind of understanding of a "fool" how do these proverbs make sense (and actually a lot of this chapter of Proverbs is dedicated to the fool)? The imagery of these Proverbs is key to feeling their impact. Snow in summer (when we need warmth), rain when it's harvest time (when we need the sun and it's time to collect the crops), and binding a stone in a sling (rather than letting it loose to fly) are as beneficial as giving honour to a fool. To honour is to recognize, to encourage and to hold up certain behaviour and achievement as worthy of admiration. But if I believe and expect that I should be admired above all others, honour only

further encourages my folly and narcissism, no? When should we honour others and when should we challenge them?

And if we are the recipient, how does honour make us feel? Does it encourage and affirm us to serve and to care, or does it make us crave for more because we are constantly in search of approval? I have great compassion for those in need of approval who have received far too little of it in their lives. I know I need my share often enough, and I can't imagine living a life where I never get any approval. But sadly, for one (a fool) who is constantly in search of honour for honour's sake, it only feeds a self-absorbed and delusional superiority. What do you think?

4,5,12 - There is a beautiful play on words in these proverbs, and they speak truth in paradoxical ways. "Do not answer..." and "answer..." To be wise in my own eyes is to be a fool (rather than being more modest and self-aware in honest truthfulness and humility about myself). And for there to be more hope for fools than for one wise in their own eyes is to be extra foolish. Why? Because to become wise in my own eyes is also to become blind about myself, to believe that others sincerely admire me instead of merely flattering me all too often, and to deceive myself by refusing to acknowledge the full truth behind my actions and motivations which are not always pure.

It takes courage and confidence to seek out honest feedback and reflection. It takes sincere desire to seek out truth even when it becomes self-critical. But as Socrates said long ago: "An unexamined life is not worth living." I believe that firmly, even when it is painful sometimes. What about you?

18-19 – People say all kinds of things to us, and sometimes the most hurtful of putdowns and deceptions (a friend who is no true friend) come in the form of a joke that is truly no joke. People may tell us they're only kidding and not to take things so seriously, but it does feel like deadly firebrands and arrows striking deep into us. We'd like to be less sensitive, and yet, we are human and we have our triggers and often fools pick up exactly where they are and fire their arrows into us in all kinds of ways. God give us strength and grace not to be sucked into the trap of reacting in ways we'll later regret.

23 – The imagery here is penetrating. A glaze on the surface of a jar or pot seems so smooth and shiny, and yet, it hides what is inside. So are nice words and well-groomed speech that hides harmful intentions out of an evil heart. Caution is important as much as is trust. We need relationships of trust where we can receive fully and freely. But sadly, we also live in a world where we need to be cautious and discern intentions behind kind words and gifts. God help us discern and be careful without losing our capacity to build trusting and freely loving relationships where we take the words and actions of others with all sincerity and gratitude for what they are.

PRAYER: Help us, O God. Even as the seeds of wisdom are in us, there is also the tug of the fool in us too. In our search for approval we deceive ourselves about our intentions or the sincerity of others in their flattering praise. At the same time, O God, some of us have trouble receiving praise and gratitude for our gifts and goodness, for we cannot trust easily. Help us in our discernment, O God. Help us be a good, honest and truthful friend, and help us feel good about our value and worth so that we can receive feedback and criticism as an opportunity to grow rather than feel rejected and put-down. Grow our worth and our humility on a solid foundation rooted in you, O God, who sees in us infinite beauty and glory, even as we have yet to become who we are fully created to be. In Jesus' name we pray this way; Amen.