

Do We Answer a Fool According to His Folly—or Not?

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By David F. Maas

HAWKINS, Texas—Proverbs 26:4-5 says: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

Numerous people like to conclude that the contents of these two verses should be classified as a contradiction.

A recent Google search on the topic, “Contradictions in the Bible,” yielded more than 1,360,000 hits.

Taking sides

On one side of the debate appeared the strange bedfellows of Islamic fundamentalists and secular-progressive atheists proclaiming that Christian fundamentalists are brain dead for not accepting their carefully studied positions.

On the other side, Christian fundamentalists and apologists systematically countered each alleged discrepancy with a reasonable and scholarly explanation.

One point-counterpoint standoff rages between *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*, edited by Dennis McKinsey, and *Tektronikon Encyclopedia Apologetica*, edited by James Patrick Holding.

The latter not only offers chapter-by-chapter rebuttals to McKinsey’s massive tome, but also for many other less ambitious works such as *101 Clear Bible Errors*, plagiarized under many different names on the Internet.

In his article “Is Proverbs in Contradiction on Answering Fools?” Mr. Holding thinks that the alleged contradiction between Proverbs 26:4-5 wins a major award for silliness.

What we have here is not contradiction but dilemma—an indication that when it comes to answering fools you cannot win because they are fools, and there is no practical cure for foolery (as this citation demonstrates).

So it is unwise to argue with a fool at his own level and recognize his own foolish suppositions, but it is good sometimes to refute him soundly, lest his foolishness seem to be confirmed by your silence.

Reasonable expectations

In his *Alleged Contradictions in the Bible*, B.J. Clarke points out that the close proximity of these verses (back to back) would rule out the idea of discrepancy even for the most sophomoric of scholars.

James Jackson, in his article “Answering the Fool,” suggests that “such close proximity reflects design, not disorder.”

Dr. E.W. Bullinger suggests that the connection between these verses can be explained by an ellipsis (something deliberately left out to grab the reader’s attention) beginning in verse 3, which compares reasoning with a fool to reasoning with a donkey.

Rather than considering these proverbs as absolute commands, the reader finds cause-and-effect cautions: If you answer a fool you will be like him, but if you do not answer a fool he will assume you are like him. Either way we would lose.

Along with ellipsis, the technique of parallelism (repeated similarities used for rhetorical effect) is used throughout Proverbs to amplify meaning.

Consider Proverbs 28:1: “The wicked flee when no one pursues; but the righteous are as bold as a lion.”

In this light, Proverbs 26:4-5 can be read: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him. [But on the other hand] answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

Examples of a paradox

Paradox provides another explanation for the alleged “contradiction.” Lynn Anderson, in his article “The Case for Mystery,” asserts that the Bible embraces paradoxes throughout.

The apostle Paul, for example, in the same chapter (see Galatians 6:2, 5), urges, “Bear one another’s burdens,” and three verses later suggests, “Each one shall bear his own load.”

Similarly, Paul warns Christians not to be “burdened again by a yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1), while teaching elsewhere that we are to become “slaves to righteousness” (Romans 6:18).

Jesus Christ provides the most sterling example of paradox when He warns His disciples that whoever desires to lead must become a servant (Luke 22:26) and whoever would save his life must be willing to lose it (Luke 17:33).

A special instance of paradox is the conundrum, or riddle. Stephen Tecklenberg, in his article “No Matter What You Do,” maintains that the “Answer not a fool . . . Answer a fool” juxtaposition is just that, a conundrum (a puzzle, a riddle, an enigma), a focusing more on the “readiness” to answer rather than on the answering. He adds, “If appropriate, give answers. If not, withhold.”

Thomas Henry Reardon, in his article “Folly to Be Wise?” points out that, while much of Scripture demands making right choices, certain decisions, especially in the Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc.), demands discernment, prudence and choosing wisely between alternatives.

Class assignment

Every semester, I propose a dilemma to my Advanced Composition classes when I ask them to explain the conundrum: “You can write a research paper in 20 hours, but you cannot write a research paper in 20 hours.”

When I assure them that there is no contradiction, they finally realize that it all depends on the distribution of the 20 hours. Clustering these 20 hours one week before the paper’s due date will lead to panic or plagiarism or both.

On the other hand, intelligent spacing of these 20 hours (over the period of a month) with scheduled periods of rest will provide the necessary energy and resources to complete the paper.

A turn of phrase

Closely related to paradox and conundrum is the turn of phrase given to a group of words. Norman Geisler in his book *When Critics Ask* cites Andrew Fuller, who insists that the meaning is altered depending on the twist given to the words. For example, “according to his folly” in one sense implies “in a foolish manner” or “behaving like a fool.” In another sense, it could imply “in the manner which his folly requires.”

Another way of explaining this turn of phrase would be the fallacy of accent, in which the meaning changes depending on which part of the sentence is emphasized. Much Yiddish humor succeeds by accenting different parts of the sentence.

Jewish humorist Leo Rosten provides this gem:

1. I *should* buy two tickets for her concert? Meaning: What, you’re giving me a lesson in ethics?
2. I should *buy* two tickets for her concert? Meaning: wouldn’t go even if she were giving out free passes!
3. I should buy *two* tickets for her concert? Meaning: I’m having enough trouble deciding whether it’s worth one.
4. I should buy two *tickets* for her concert? Meaning: She should be giving out free passes, or the hall will be empty.
5. I should buy two tickets for *her* concert? Meaning: Did she buy tickets to our daughter’s recital?
6. I should buy two tickets for her *concert*? Meaning: You mean, they call what she does a “concert”?

Not contradictory but complementary

Applying this formula to Proverbs 26, we accent the following parts of verses 4 and 5: “Do not answer a fool according to his *folly*, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool *according to* his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

As in Fuller’s turn of phrase, the first accent refers to behaving like a fool, and the second accent refers to the manner that his foolishness requires.

David Jon Hill, in his article “Twelve Rules for Bible Study” (*Tomorrow’s World*, July 1969), substantiates the turn-of-phrase and accent explanations, asserting that differing circumstances account for the so-called contradictions:

“Actually, these two verses are not contradictory—but complementary!”

Gems of wisdom

The use of either verse—that is, its principle applied to a particular use—depends on the set of circumstances. Both these verses contain gems of wisdom that each one of us needs to learn to properly apply in answering other people’s questions.

The last part of each verse holds the key that unlocks the meaning of these verses—and shows them to be practical, usable and wise principles.

Verse 4 reads, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.” The last part of the verse holds the key: Don’t degrade yourself by descending to his level in an argument! Don’t harangue, don’t bite back, don’t try to argue with someone who is obviously trying to stir contention.

Robert Deffingbaugh in his Bible study “The Fool,” says of Proverbs 26:5:

“We should not allow the fool to drag us down to his level. The fool is exasperating; he is looking for trouble, and he often tempts us to oblige him. Since the fool will spout off and speak his mind, we are tempted to lose our temper with him as well.”

Proverbs instructs us not to allow him to get the best of us, lest we be lowered to his level.

Two modern examples

Let’s notice the contrasting decisions of two modern celebrities who were dealing with people they considered foolish.

When Donald Trump unwisely got into a name-calling contest with Rosie O’Donnell, it gave her a fallacious, elevated estimation of her debating abilities, deluding her into a false sense of importance and wisdom, and at the same time it artificially boosted the ratings of the television show *The View*.

Fred Thompson, on the other hand, when asked to debate the merits of “universal health care” with Michael Moore, who lauds Fidel Castro’s system in Cuba, made it clear that he would not lower himself to Mr. Moore’s foolishness.

Stephen Tecklenberg, reflecting on his protesting of the blasphemous movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, observes, “In those areas where the protests were the loudest, the film received the best attendance. It was as if our best efforts simply backfired. Perhaps it would have been better if we had done nothing!”

Moses’ mistake

Scripture provides numerous examples of biblical figures falling short of successfully following Proverbs 26:4.

Consider the example of how Moses answered folly in a foolish manner in Numbers 20:3-11. The people complained (in verses 3-5):

“If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why then have you brought the LORD’S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here?

“Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It certainly does not look like a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor do we find water to drink.”

When Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces, the glory of the LORD appeared to them and He gave instructions to Moses (verses 6-8).

God told Moses to “speak to the rock.” But is that what Moses did?

Here is what Moses said to the people (verse 10): “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?”

And notice what Moses did.

Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod (verse 11).

We know from verse 12 that God was not happy with Moses’ decision.

God said: “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

Christ dealt wisely

Jesus Christ demonstrated a contrasting style of dealing with antagonists.

A group of gainsaying Pharisees tried to push his buttons, provoking an argument, but Jesus kept his cool, answering their question with one of His own.

Using this strategy, he placed this pack of weasels on the horns of an untenable dilemma, successfully answering their foolishness according to their folly.

One such example is found in Luke 20:2-8.

The religious leaders asked Him (in verse 2): “By what authority do You do these things, or who gave You this authority?”

He responded (in verses 3-4): "I will also ask you a question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or from men?"

They analyzed their dilemma (verses 5-6) by saying: "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us to death, for they have convinced themselves that John served as a prophet."

So they chose to say that they did not know where it came from (verse 7).

So Jesus replied (in verse 8): "Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

In another instance, Jesus was confronted by Herod Antipas, who had been manipulated by his wife to murder John the Baptist.

Jesus, realizing the man to be a compromised fool, held His peace (Luke 23:8-9).

A time to avoid

Following Jesus' example, the apostle Paul cautioned Timothy—and thus us—that there are times when a fool's comment does not warrant a reply.

Here are two such warnings.

2 Timothy 2:23: "But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife."

1 Timothy 6:3-5: "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself."

A time to speak up

The apostle Paul, despite his cautions to Timothy, realized at one point that if he did not dispute the foolish challenges of his enemies (concerning his apostolic authority and methods), naïve members of the Corinthian congregation might believe them.

His lengthy answer spans 2 Corinthians 11 and 12.

Notice his words in 2 Corinthians 12:11: "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have received commendation by you, for in no respect did I prove inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I seem a nobody."

Obviously, Paul felt uncomfortable about answering these allegations, as is evidenced by his self-effacing reference to himself as a fool.

Yet he also realized that his silence would have tacitly endorsed the charges.

Strong words by our Savior

Likewise our Savior, when confronted about His identity and credentials, knew the timing was right to put the gainsaying Pharisees in their place.

Notice the dialogue in John 8.

The Jews (in verses 52-53): "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham died, and the prophets also; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.'

"Surely You do not consider yourselves greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out to be?"

Jesus answered (in verses 54-56): "If I glorify Myself, My glory amounts to nothing; My Father glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'We acknowledge Him as our God'; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will lie like you, but I do know Him and keep His word.

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and felt glad."

They responded (in verse 57): "You have not reached yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?"

Jesus explained (in verse 58): "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham came into the world, I already existed."

When the people found stones to throw at Him, Jesus escaped in the crowd (verse 59). It was not yet time for Him to suffer and die.

As a wise person said: If you are going to preach a warning message, you had better be mindful of your exit strategies or be prepared to die on that hill of battle.

Learning to discern

There certainly are times when diplomacy fails and silence is no longer appropriate.

Our society is replete with foolish teachings, ideas, theories and misconceptions—secular and religious—and, under the right circumstances, they should be confronted and shown to be false, lest they be accepted as factual.

As maturing Christians, we must learn to discern when it is proper to answer a fool according to his folly (in the manner his foolishness deserves), and when it is a bad idea to answer a fool according to his folly (lowering ourselves to his undignified level).

The right exercise of God's Spirit in us, which Paul calls "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), provides the potential to have and use this ability.