

The Folly of Fools Sunday, 9/4/22

Last week we faced the awesome power of the tongue, a gift from the Lord that we can use for good or ill. Cultivating holy speech requires our attention, awareness, and discipline. But even more so, holy speech requires holiness of heart, because as Jesus reminded us, “whatever is in your heart determines what you say.”¹

Today we’ll marvel at all the foolishness of the world. We’ve all said and done foolish things. I’m not sure if I’d agree that insanity is doing the same thing twice and expecting a different result, but I think that would be one good definition of foolishness. For example, I once rode my bicycle into the back of a parked car. Another time I went out on a three-hour snowshoe trip with my camera and forgot to put film in it. I’m glad to say that I never repeated those mistakes. That doesn’t make me wise, but I like to think that I paid attention at least and learned something from my foolishness.

What foolishness have you displayed in your life? Hopefully they’re things you did once, learned your lesson, and never repeated. Everyone understands foolish mistakes, and we even get a certain amount of laughter in their retelling. But there’s another kind of foolishness that’s a bit more difficult to understand. I’m talking about those times when we know something to be true, and yet we choose to act as if it wasn’t true; When we have all the wisdom that we need, but we ignore it and make ourselves into fools.

The internet has long been fascinated with our foolish failures, and it’s easy to find examples of failed life hacks, many of them well-intentioned but failed in implementation. Here’s a fictional life hack failure that makes fun of the whole phenomenon: Cut tennis balls in half to store more in each can. Well, yes.....But!

Other life hacks are generally accepted and practiced by people, but don’t really work. For example, Energizer warns that putting your batteries in the fridge or freezer can actually shorten their life “if condensation results in corroded contacts or label or seal damage due to extreme temperature storage.”²

We’re always looking for new life hacks, ways to make our lives better. In a way, our preoccupation with the foolish wisdom of the internet is a prime example of our first reading

¹ Matthew 12:34. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² <https://interestingengineering.com/diy/9-popular-life-hacks-that-dont-actually-work>

this morning, where we saw a personification of wisdom chastising us for our stubbornness in refusing God’s wisdom. “How long, you simpletons, will you insist on being simpleminded?”³

For some reason, we persist in our own foolish, failed life hacks instead of turning to the tried-and-true wisdom of God’s Word. As we hear some proverbs about fools today, listen to see if one or more of them speak to your heart. Pay attention to nudges of the Holy Spirit, or impressions or feelings you experience as you listen. Let’s assess our own readiness to respond to the folly of fools.

My favorite proverbs are about fools, perhaps because it’s so easy to look at other people and see their foolishness. Reading the proverbs, however, always reminds me of my own foolishness. Our second reading is a collection of proverbs that round up some of the most incisive indictments of our foolishness. I’m starting with Proverbs 26:3, in the New Living Translation. {[Read Proverbs 26:4-12 NLT](#)}

These first two proverbs have always vexed me, because they appear to be offering contradictory wisdom. So which is it? Should we answer the foolish arguments of fools, or not? It stands to reason that sometimes the wise thing to do is to not answer fools, while other times we should answer them. Ah, but how to discern the difference?

Proverbs 18:2 warns us that “Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions.”⁴ So why should we bother? On the other hand, Proverbs 13:14 promise that “The instruction of the wise is like a life-giving fountain; those who accept it avoid the snares of death.”⁵ Perhaps there are instances when we can share God’s wisdom with a fool and save them?

Ultimately, these two proverbs may point to the limit of our capacity to understand and apply God’s wisdom. There’s no substitute for the Holy Spirit in discerning foolishness from wisdom. Another life hack might be this: Perhaps it’s wisest to simply stay away from fools whenever possible!

The Proverbs aren’t exactly subtle in their warnings. Here’s a case in point from

³ Proverbs 1:22. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁴ Proverbs 18:2. Ibid

⁵ Proverbs 13:14. Ibid

Proverbs 26:6-“Trusting a fool to convey a message is like cutting off one’s feet or drinking poison!”⁶ Wow, that’s really harsh! Did you spot the irony in these images? In ancient times, messengers had to be sent out by foot, so instead of gaining an extra pair of feet by sending a messenger, we lose our own feet when we send a fool.

An example of this proverb in real life might be when we ask a friend to pass on a verbal message to another friend. We’ve all played the telephone game, right? The more people involved in the communication chain, the more likely a message is to get garbled. Throw a fool into the mix and all bets are off. It’s far better to speak for yourself. If you can’t do that, pick a messenger you can trust and make sure they thoroughly understand the message you mean to convey.

I’ve never had to deal with paralysis of my arms and legs, but I do know what it feels like when my leg falls asleep. Simple things like standing and walking become difficult and even painful. When I read Proverbs 26:7- “A proverb in the mouth of a fool is as useless as a paralyzed leg,”⁷ I think of the times when my leg has fallen asleep.

This is a helpful proverb because it reminds us that there’s a difference between knowing about God’s wisdom and letting it transform our hearts and shape our lives. That’s true for all of God’s Word, and not just the Wisdom literature like Proverbs. Anyone can read and even memorize the Bible. In fact, there are people who teach about the Bible who know all about it but don’t seek to apply any substantial portions of it to their own choices and actions. How about you? As James wrote, “[D]on’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.”⁸

Now here’s an unusual image. “Honoring a fool is as foolish as tying a stone to a slingshot.”⁹ We might better paraphrase this as “Giving authority to a fool is as effective as trying to throw a rock that’s been tied to the sling.” In other words, don’t expect a fool to be effective in governing anything. Oh boy, the political humor could really flower around this proverb! Outside of politics, what’s the life hack for us? If you’re a leader, seek God’s

⁶ Proverbs 26:6. Ibid

⁷ Proverbs 26:7. Ibid

⁸ James 1:22. Ibid

⁹ Proverbs 26:8. Ibid

wisdom before you seek authority. If you're a follower, follow leaders who demonstrate that they're grounded in God's wisdom.

“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his foolishness.”¹⁰ This is a terribly unflattering image considering how often we all resemble it. How often have I read a proverb, when a light bulb went off in my head and I said to myself, “Hey, that's really true! I've got to remember that!” But then, a day or even an hour later, I find myself choosing a foolish path, instead of a wise one. Maybe you've had the same experience.

That's part of the fallen condition of sin, what the Apostle Paul complained about when he said in Romans, “I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.”¹¹ The life hack in this Proverb might be to acknowledge that we're creatures of habit, prone to repeat the things we don't want to. We need the Spirit of Christ to intervene for us in breaking our sin habits, and we need to seek that deliberately and zealously from God. Because, really, who wants to be the dog returning to its vomit? Gross!

This section of Proverbs ends so perfectly with 26:12- “There is more hope for fools than for people who think they are wise.” Awesome, just as we're beginning to feel a little smarter and wiser, armed with our knowledge of the Proverbs, God walks by and reminds us that if we think we're wise, than we're really not! Can we be honest and admit that, as Christians, we all too often think we have the right answers? Our last life hack is this: Recognize that all wisdom comes from God. God alone is wise, and we always depend on God's wisdom.

In the end, we come back to where we started in this series. Only a healthy fear of the Lord can save us from our own self-inflicted foolishness and the foolishness of everyone else around us. We keep failing to do and say wise things, but we don't give up seeking to know and live out more of God's wisdom. Instead, when we fail, we return to the One who is always righteous, who is the embodiment of wisdom, who makes no wrong choices. We turn to Jesus. Jesus can do what we can't do with all the wisdom of the world.

Please take some time now to reflect on your foolishness and your need for the Spirit,

¹⁰ Proverbs 26:11. Ibid

¹¹ Romans 7:15. Ibid

wisdom, and grace of Jesus.



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