



Proverbs - Chapter Twenty Six

VI Proverbs 25:1-29:27 - Further Wise Sayings of Solomon (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Six

As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly. Without gossip a quarrel dies down. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it.

Introduction to Proverbs 25:28-26:12 (continued)

All of these proverbs focus on the fool, who is mentioned explicitly in every verse except Proverbs 25:28 and 26:2.

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

Proverbs 26:1

Like snow in summer or rain in harvest. These things are out of place and in an economy based on grain grown in the field, they are disasters of bad timing. The prophet Samuel warned the Israelites that God would send such a disaster as this upon them if they disobeyed him: <<*Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves*>> (1 Samuel 12:17).

So honour is not fitting for a fool. Honour for the fool is also out of place - and can lead to disaster. Solomon later provided another example with unpredictable outcomes: <<*There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves*>> (Ecclesiastes 10:5-7). Derek Kidner commented, "The present

age, through the tricks of publicity, is especially prone to idolise ‘vain and light persons’, for whom the treatment of verse 3 might be better medicine.”

- ² Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying,
an undeserved curse goes nowhere.

Proverbs 26:2

Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying. Solomon described birds that fly without taking rest on a branch or a surface.

An undeserved curse is a wish for harm to come to a righteous person, or a word of condemnation wrongly spoken against them. However, it goes nowhere because God, who is sovereign over all things, gives no heed to it but rather protects the righteous person. The Lord turned a human intention of a curse upon his people into his blessing: <<*Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you*>> (Deuteronomy 23:5), and: <<*Let them curse, but you will bless. Let my assailants be put to shame; may your servant be glad*>> (Psalm 109:28).

- ³ A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,
and a rod for the back of fools.
- ⁴ Do not answer fools according to their folly,
or you will be a fool yourself.
- ⁵ Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will be wise in their own eyes.
- ⁶ It is like cutting off one’s foot and drinking down violence,
to send a message by a fool.

Proverbs 26:3-6

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey. There is an instrument appropriate for these animals but not for the people of God: <<*Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you*>> (Psalm 32:9). There is also an instrument that fits the fool: a rod for the back of fools: <<*A rod is for the back of one who lacks sense*>> (Proverbs 10:13b). What they will not learn from the words of wisdom they must learn through the infliction of pain, whether physical, spiritual or emotional. Kidner observed, “This proverb, with its fellows, is written for us in two capacities: as people dealing with fools, and as potential fools ourselves.”

Verses 4-5 are especially striking in that they appear to contradict each other. To answer fools according to their folly is to keep replying to their remarks in order to show up their folly. Verse 4 gives the general policy, i.e. do not answer fools, because the person who does will end up a fool yourself as the fool responds to their reply with further folly: the interchange will have no end. Verse 5 gives the exception answer fools, because sometimes they or others may think to their own harm that they cannot be answered (v.12).

It is like cutting off one's foot and drinking down violence, to send a message by a fool. One should never expect a good result from sending a message by the hand of a fool. It is like harming one's self. Curiously, God chose the foolish things of this world to be his messengers: <<*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong*>> (1 Corinthians 1:27), but he wants them to be something better than fools in his work.

- 7 The legs of a disabled person hang limp;
so does a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
- 8 It is like binding a stone in a sling
to give honour to a fool.
- 9 Like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
- 10 Like an archer who wounds everybody
is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard.
- 11 Like a dog that returns to its vomit
is a fool who reverts to his folly.
- 12 Do you see persons wise in their own eyes?
There is more hope for fools than for them.

Proverbs 26:7-12

The legs of a disabled person hang limp; so does a proverb in the mouth of a fool. In a series of 'like' statements, Solomon colourfully explained the nature of the fool:

- The fool's possession of wisdom, such as a proverb in the mouth, is useless, like the legs of the paraplegic.
- The fool's receiving of honour is stupid, like the one who binds a stone in a sling so that it cannot be cast out.

- The fool's attempt to proclaim wisdom brings pain, like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard.

One who fastens into a sling a stone that is meant to be flung out of the sling shows that he has neither the knowledge nor the skill to use it, and is in danger of hurting himself. Likewise, one who bestows honour on a fool shows a failure to understand the purpose of giving such recognition and stands to suffer harm when the fool proves unworthy of the honour and thus damages the reputation of the one who wrongly honoured him.

A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a thornbush in the hand of a drunkard because when a fool uses a proverb, he is insensitive to the fact that it applies principally to himself.

Like a dog that returns to its vomit supplies a vivid image for 2 Peter 2:22. A fool will not change their ways apart from a dramatic transformation. Just as it is in the dog's nature to return to his own vomit, it is the fool's nature to continuously repeat his folly.

After 11 verses describing the terrible state of the fool, v.12 becomes a forceful punch line: even more hopeless than the situation of the fool is the situation of the stubbornly unteachable people, who are wise in their own eyes (v.5), which ignores the earlier advice from Solomon: <<*Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil*>> (Proverbs 3:7). The reference to a better hope for fools indicates just how dire the situation is, since the fool is described as one who already <<*think their own way is right*>> (Proverbs 12:15a). Yet there are degrees of folly, and some of the more thoughtless types of fool can sometimes be reclaimed.

13 The lazy person says, 'There is a lion in the road!

There is a lion in the streets!'

14 As a door turns on its hinges,

so does a lazy person in bed.

15 The lazy person buries a hand in the dish,

and is too tired to bring it back to the mouth.

16 The lazy person is wiser in self-esteem

than seven who can answer discreetly.

Proverbs 26:13-16

These proverbs focus on the sluggard. Verses 13-15 present him as comically ludicrous in his laziness, and v.16 gives this portrait a twist by observing that

the sluggard considers himself the paradigm of wisdom. His fear of the lion (v.13) uses a remote possibility of danger as an excuse for not working.

There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets! The lazy person will create any excuse to avoid work. A lion in the road was a virtual impossibility in Biblical times, although there are occasions when they were used in God's judgement: <<*Then as he went away, a lion met him on the road and killed him. His body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it; the lion also stood beside the body. People passed by and saw the body thrown in the road, with the lion standing by the body. And they came and told it in the town where the old prophet lived. When the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, 'It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of the Lord; therefore the Lord has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him according to the word that the Lord spoke to him'*>> (1 Kings 13:24-26). The lazy person shows creative talent by imagining not only a lion, but a fierce lion, and a form of work, but it is dedicated to the effort of avoiding any type of labour.

The church is taught to avoid one lion: <<*Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour*>> (1 Peter 5:8), **and to seek another:** <<*Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'*>> (Revelation 5:5).

As a door turns on its hinges. The only way a door can turn is on its hinges. The only turning the lazy person does is on their bed.

The lazy person buries a hand in the dish, and is too tired to bring it back to the mouth. The lack of energy and initiative in the lazy person is so profound that they cannot or will not properly care for their personal needs: <<*The lazy person buries a hand in the dish, and will not even bring it back to the mouth*>> (Proverbs 19:24). Kidner added, "Admiration for the wit of this portraiture has to be tempered with disquiet, on reflection that the sluggard will be the last to see his own features here (v.16), for he has no idea that he is lazy: he is not a shirker but a 'realist' (v.13); not self-indulgent but 'below his best in the morning' (v.14); his inertia is 'an objection to being hustled' (v.15); his mental indolence a fine 'sticking to his guns' (v.16)."

The lazy person is wiser in self-esteem. Lazy people may lack energy and initiative, but they do not lack a high opinion of themselves. They consider themselves smarter than seven who can answer discreetly. The lazy person has great confidence in their own ability, but never seems to accomplish much. Adam Clarke commented, "Seven here only means perfection, abundance, or multitude. He is wiser in his own eyes than a multitude of the wisest men."

Introduction to Proverbs 26:17-22

These proverbs describe a person who uses their words carelessly. Examples include interfering in other people's arguments (v.17), deceiving people as a joke without concern for the consequences (vv.18-19), and gossiping, especially where gossip provokes conflict (vv.20-21). Verse 22 directly warns the reader that gossip is seductive, and the proverb serves as a bridge to the next section on the liar (vv.23-28).

- 17 Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears
is one who meddles in the quarrel of another.

Proverbs 26:17

Someone who stands behind a passing dog and grabs it by the ears is temporarily safe from harm, but they are actually trapped because when they let go, the angry dog will attack them.

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

Proverbs 26:18-19

Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows. Solomon painted the picture of a fierce warrior with many weapons, spreading destruction everywhere.

Is one who deceives a neighbour. The person who plays tricks on others, deceiving them, and covering it by saying, 'I was only joking!' is a danger to others - and a very unwelcome companion.

- 20 For lack of wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases.
21 As charcoal is to hot embers and wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.
22 The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels;
they go down into the inner parts of the body.

Proverbs 26:20-22

Where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases. Just as wood fuels a fire, so the talebearer or gossip fuels strife. The fire will not continue to burn without the

wood, and the strife will not continue when the talebearer stops their work. James described the power of words to set a destructive fire; refer to James 3:6. Clarke observed, “The tale-receiver and the tale-bearer are the agents of discord. If none received the slander in the first instance, it could not be propagated. Hence our proverb, ‘The receiver is as bad as the thief.’ And our laws treat them equally; for the receiver of stolen goods, knowing them to be stolen, is hanged, as well as he who stole them.”

So is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife. Strife does not create itself. It has a maker, and it is the gossip, the talebearer, the contentious man.

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. This proverb, repeated from Proverbs 18:8, explains that the gossip and evil reports brought by the talebearer are almost impossible to resist. Those who should know better find it difficult to tell the talebearer to stop talking.

They go down into the inner parts of the body. When the words of a talebearer are received, they normally have an effect on the hearer. The hearer contemplates the words which often change the way they think and feel about people, even if what the talebearer says is not true or is not confirmed. God gave a strong word regarding the confirmation of testimony: <<***A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained***>> (Deuteronomy 19:15), and: <<***In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid***>> (John 8:17), which Paul confirmed as relevant to the church: <<***This is the third time I am coming to you. ‘Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses’***>> (2 Corinthians 13:1), and: <<***Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses***>> (1 Timothy 5:19).

Introduction to Proverbs 26:23-28

These verses concern the liar. He artfully conceals his lies, and one should take care not to be fooled by him (vv.23-25). However, eventually his lies will be exposed and he will be entrapped in his own web of deceit (vv.26-28). The Hebrew of v.23a presents a challenge: the Masoretic text suggests that the dross from refining silver was actually used to make a glaze for ceramics; the text here is based on a related Ugaritic word for the glaze on a pot. In either case, just as cheap pottery can be made to look beautiful, so fervent speech can disguise an evil heart.

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

Proverbs 26:23

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

This is an example of something that looks superficially good with a silver veneer; but it is worthless earthenware on the inside. So the person mentioned in the first line may attract people superficially, but inside they are worthless: <<*Then the Lord said to him, 'Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness'*>> (Luke 11:39). There are people who are able to speak with power and persuasion, but they have a wicked heart. The ill effect of their wicked heart is made much more effective because of their fervent words: <<*They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain*>> (Ezekiel 33:31).

Clarke commented, "Lips which make great professions of friendship are like a vessel plated over with base metal to make it resemble silver; but it is only a vile pot, and even the outside is not pure."

- ²⁴ An enemy dissembles in speaking
while harbouring deceit within;
- ²⁵ when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it,
for there are seven abominations concealed within;
- ²⁶ though hatred is covered with guile,
the enemy's wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.

Proverbs 26:24-26

An enemy dissembles in speaking while harbouring deceit within. It is common for those who hate others - God or men - to disguise it with their words: <<*Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt*>> (Psalm 31:18), <<*And when they come to see me, they utter empty words, while their hearts gather mischief; when they go out, they tell it abroad*>> (Psalm 41:6). They do not want to give up their hate, but they do not want to be known as a hater. The secret hater deceives others, but they also deceive themselves. They imagine themselves to be a better person than they really are.

When an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it. This secret hater should not be trusted. Even if they speak kindly, their words do not reflect the true thoughts of their heart - their hatred is covered with guile.

The enemy's wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. Whether this assembly represents the people of God, is in the world or in the world to come, the wickedness and evil heart of the secret hater will be revealed.

27 Whoever digs a pit will fall into it,
and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling.

28 A lying tongue hates its victims,
and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Proverbs 26:27-28

Whoever digs a pit probably refers to the hostile enemy described in vv.24-26. They are preparing a hidden trap for someone, but they are the ones who will be harmed: <<*They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made*>> (Psalm 7:15), and: <<*When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him'*>> (Esther 6:13). In his judgements God often appoints that people reap what they sow; that he will treat them the same way that they have treated others. They will fall into the pit they dug for others; the stone they rolled against someone else will roll back on them: <<*Those who mislead the upright into evil ways will fall into pits of their own making, but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance*>> (Proverbs 28:10).

A lying tongue hates its victims. Liars do their destruction without sympathy for others. They do not feel sorry for the ones they crush; they actively hate them.

A flattering mouth works ruin. Flattery is another way the lying tongue brings ruin. Their flattering mouth builds pride and manipulates others for deceptive goals. Kidner concluded, "The heart of the matter is exposed in v.28, with the fact that deceit, whether it hurts or soothes, is practical hatred, since truth is vital, and pride fatal, to right decisions."