

CHAPTER 26

~~ PROVERBS 26:1~~

PROPER TREATMENT OF FOOLS

Note,

1. It is too common a thing for honour to be given to fools, who are utterly unworthy of it and unfit for it. Bad men, who have neither wit nor grace, are sometimes preferred by princes, and applauded and cried up by the people. *Folly is set in great dignity*, as Solomon observed, ~~ Ecclesiastes 10:6.~~

2. It is very absurd and unbecoming when it is so. It is an incongruous *as snow in summer*, and as great a disorder in the commonwealth as that is in the course of nature and in the seasons of the year; nay, it is as injurious *as rain in harvest*, which hinders the labourers and spoils the fruits of the earth when they are ready to be gathered. When bad men are in power they commonly abuse their power, in discouraging virtue, and giving countenance to wickedness, for want of wisdom to discern it and grace to detest it.

~~ PROVERBS 26:2~~

PROPER TREATMENT OF FOOLS

Here is,

1. The folly of passion. It makes men scatter *causeless curses*, wishing ill to others upon presumption that they are bad and have done ill, when either they mistake the person or misunderstand the fact, or they call evil good and good evil. Give honour to a fool, and he thunders out his anathemas against all that he is disgusted with, right or wrong. Great men, when wicked, think they have a privilege to keep those about them in awe, by cursing them, and swearing at them, which yet is an expression of the

most impotent malice and shows their weakness as much as their wickedness.

2. The safety of innocency. He that is cursed without cause, whether by furious imprecations or solemn anathemas, the curse shall do him no more harm than the bird that flies over his head, than Goliath's curses did to David, ~~OTB~~ 1 Samuel 17:43. It will fly away like the sparrow or the wild dove, which go nobody knows where, till they return to their proper place, as the curse will at length return upon the head of him that uttered it.

~~OTB~~ PROVERBS 26:3

PROPER TREATMENT OF FOOLS

Here,

1. Wicked men are compared to *the horse* and *the ass*, so brutish are they, so unreasonable, so unruly, and not to be governed but by force or fear, so low has sin sunk men, so much below themselves. Man indeed is *born like the wild ass's colt*, but as some by the grace of God are changed, and become rational, so others by custom in sin are hardened, and become more and more sottish, *as the horse and the mule*, ~~OTB~~ Psalm 32:9.

2. Direction is given to use them accordingly. Princes, instead of giving *honour to a fool* (v. 1), must put disgrace upon him — instead of putting power into his hand, must exercise power over him. A *horse* unbroken needs *a whip* for correction, and an *ass* *a bridle* for direction and to check him when he would turn out of the way; so a vicious man, who will not be under the guidance and restraint of religion and reason, ought to be whipped and bridled, to be rebuked severely, and made to smart for what he has done amiss, and to be restrained from offending any more.

~~OTB~~ PROVERBS 26:4-5

PROPER TREATMENT OF FOOLS

See here the noble security of the scripture-style, which seems to contradict itself, but really does not. Wise men have need to be directed

how to deal with fools; and they have never more need of wisdom than in dealing with such, to know when to keep silence and when to speak, for there may be a time for both.

1. In some cases a wise man will not set his wit to that of a fool so far as to *answer him according to his folly* “If he boast of himself, do not answer him by boasting of thyself. If he rail and talk passionately, do not thou rail and talk passionately too. If he tell one great lie, do not thou tell another to match it. If he calumniate thy friends, do not thou calumniate his. If he banter, do not answer him in his own language, *lest thou be like him*, even thou, who knowest better things, who hast more sense, and hast been better taught.”

2. Yet, in other cases, a wise man will use his wisdom for the conviction of a fool, when, by taking notice of what he says, there may be hopes of doing good, or at least preventing further, mischief, either to himself or others. “If thou have reason to think that thy silence will be deemed an evidence of the weakness of thy cause, or of thy own weakness, in such a case *answer him*, and let it be an answer *ad hominem* — *to the man*, beat him at his own weapons, and that will be an answer *ad rem* — *to the point*, or as good as one. If he offer any thing that looks like an argument, an answer that, and suit thy answer to his case. If he think, because thou dost not answer him, that what he says is unanswerable, then give him an answer, *lest he be wise in his own conceit* and boast of a victory.” For (⁴⁰⁷⁵Luke 7:35) Wisdom's children must justify her.

~~2816~~ PROVERBS 26:6-9

PROPER TREATMENT OF FOOLS

To recommend wisdom to us, and to quicken us to the diligent use of all the means for the getting of wisdom, Solomon here shows that fools are fit for nothing; they are either sottish men, who will never think and design at all, or vicious men, who will never think and design well.

1. They are not fit to be entrusted with any business, not fit to go on an errand (v. 6): *He that* does but *send a message by the hand of a fool*, of a careless heedless person, one who is so full of his jests and so given to his pleasures that he cannot apply his mind to any thing that is serious, will

find his message misunderstood, the one half of it forgotten, the rest awkwardly delivered, and so many blunders made about it that he might as well have *cut off his legs*, that is, never have sent him. Nay, he will *drink damage*; it will be very much to his prejudice to have employed such a one, who, instead of bringing him a good account of his affairs, will abuse him and put a trick upon him; for, in Solomon's language, a knave and a fool are of the same signification. It will turn much to a man's disgrace to make use of the service of a fool, for people will be apt to judge of the master by his messenger.

2. They are not fit to have any honour put upon them. He had said (v. 1), *Honour is not seemly for a fool*; here he shows that it is lost and thrown away upon him, as if a man should throw a precious stone, or a stone fit to be used in weighing, into a heap of common stones, where it would be buried and of no use; it is as absurd as if a man should *dress up a stone in purple* (so others); nay, it is dangerous, it is like *a stone bound in a sling*, with which a man will be likely to do hurt. To *give honour to a fool* is to put a sword in a madman's hand, with which we know not what mischief he may do, even to those that put it into his hand.

3. They are not fit to deliver wise sayings, nor should they undertake to handle any matter of weight, though they should be instructed concerning it, and be able to say something to it. Wise sayings, as a foolish man delivers them and applies them (in such a manner that one may know he does not rightly understand them), lose their excellency and usefulness: *A parable in the mouth of fools* ceases to be a parable, and becomes a jest. If a man who lives a wicked life, yet speaks religiously and takes God's covenant into his mouth,

(1.) He does but shame himself and his profession: *As the legs of the lame are not equal*, by reason of which their going is unseemly, so unseemly is it for a fool to pretend to speak apophthegms, and give advice, and for a man to talk devoutly whose conversation is a constant contradiction to his talk and gives him the lie. His good words raise him up, but then his bad life takes him down, and so his *legs are not equal*. "A wise saying," (says bishop Patrick) "doth as ill become a fool as dancing doth a cripple; for, as his lameness never so much appears as when he would seem nimble, so the other's folly is never so ridiculous as when he would seem wise." As therefore it is best for a lame man to keep his seat, so it is best for a silly man, or a bad man, to hold his tongue.

(2.) He does but do mischief with it to himself and others, as a drunkard does with a thorn, or any other sharp thing which he takes in his hand, with which he tears himself and those about him, because he knows not how to manage it. Those that talk well and do not live well, their good words will aggravate their own condemnation and others will be hardened by their inconsistency with themselves. Some give this sense of it: The sharpest saying, by which a sinner, one would think, should be pricked to the heart, makes no more impression upon a fool, no, though it come out of his own mouth, than the scratch of a thorn does upon the hand of a man when he is drunk, who then feels it not nor complains of it, ~~235~~ Proverbs 23:35.

~~235~~ PROVERBS 26:10

THE CONDUCT OF FOOLS

Our translation gives this verse a different reading in the text and in the margin; and accordingly it expresses either,

1. The equity of a good God. The *Master*, or *Lord* (so *Rab* signifies), or, as we read it, *The great God that formed all things* at first, and still governs them in infinite wisdom, renders to every man according to his work. He *rewards the fool*, who sinned through ignorance, *who knew not his Lord's will, with few stripes*; and he *rewards the transgressor*, who sinned presumptuously and with a high hand, *who knew his Lord's will and would not do it, with many stripes*. Some understand it of the goodness of God's common providence even to fools and transgressors, on whom *he causes his sun to shine and his rain to fall*. Or,

2. The iniquity of a bad prince (so the margin reads it): *A great man grieves all, and he hires the fool; he hires also the transgressors*. When a wicked man gets power in his hand, by himself, and by the fools and knaves whom he employs under him, whom he hires and chooses to make use of, he grieves all who are under him and is vexatious to them. We should therefore *pray for kings and all in authority*, that, under them, our lives may be quiet and peaceable.

PROVERBS 26:11

THE CONDUCT OF FOOLS

See here,

1. What an abominable thing sin is, and how hateful sometimes it is made to appear, even to the sinner himself. When his conscience is convinced, or he feels smart from his sin, he is sick of it, and vomits it up; he seems then to detest it and to be willing to part with it. It is in itself, and, first or last, will be to the sinner, more loathsome than the vomit of a dog,

Psalm 36:2.

2. How apt sinners are to relapse into it notwithstanding. As the dog, after he has gained ease by vomiting that which burdened his stomach, yet goes and licks it up again, so sinners, who have been convinced only and not converted, return to sin again, forgetting how sick it made them. The apostle (⁶¹²2 Peter 2:22) applies this proverb to those that *have known the way of righteousness* but are *turned from it*; but God will *spue them out of his mouth*, ⁶¹⁶Revelation 3:16.

PROVERBS 26:12

THE CONDUCT OF FOOLS

Here is,

1. A spiritual disease supposed, and that is self-conceit: *Seest thou a man?* Yes, we see many a one, *wise in his own conceit*, who has some little sense, but is proud of it, thinks it much more than it is, more than any of his neighbours, have, and enough, so that he needs no more, has such a conceit of his own abilities as makes him opinionative, dogmatical, and censorious; and all the use he makes of his knowledge is that it puffs him up. Or, if by a wise man we understand a religious man, it describes the character of those who, making some show of religion, conclude their spiritual state to be good when really it is very bad, like Laodicea,

⁶¹⁷Revelation 3:17.

2. The danger of this disease. It is in a manner desperate: *There is more hope of a fool, that knows and owns himself to be such, than of such a one.* Solomon was not only a wise man himself, but a teacher of wisdom; and this observation he made upon his pupils, that he found his work most difficult and least successful with those that had a good opinion of themselves and were not sensible that they needed instruction. Therefore he that *seems to himself to be wise must become a fool, that he may be wise,* ^{<408>}1 Corinthians 3:18. There is more hope of a publican than of a proud Pharisee, ^{<412>}Matthew 21:32. Many are hindered from being truly wise and religious by a false and groundless conceit that they are so, ^{<404>}John 9:40, 41.

^{<413>}PROVERBS 26:13

THE DISGRACE OF SLOTHFULNESS

When a man talks foolishly we say, He talks idly; for none betray their folly more than those who are idle and go about to excuse themselves in their idleness. As men's folly makes them slothful, so their slothfulness makes them foolish. Observe,

1. What *the slothful man* really dreads. He dreads *the way, the streets*, the place where work is to be done and a journey to be gone; he hates business, hates every thing that requires care and labour.
2. What he dreams of, and pretends to dread — *a lion in the way*. When he is pressed to be diligent, either in his worldly affairs or in the business of religion, this is his excuse (and a sorry excuse it is, as bad as none), *There is a lion in the way*, some insuperable difficulty or danger which he cannot pretend to grapple with. Lions frequent woods and deserts; and, in the day-time, when man has business to do, they are in their dens, ^{<402>}Psalms 104:22, 23. But the sluggard fancies, or rather pretends to fancy, *a lion in the streets*, whereas the lion is only in his own fancy, nor is he so fierce as he is painted. Note, It is a foolish thing to frighten ourselves from real duties by fancied difficulties, ^{<2114>}Ecclesiastes 11:4.

PROVERBS 26:14

THE DISGRACE OF SLOTHFULNESS

Having seen the slothful man in fear of his work, here we find him in love with his ease; he lies in his bed on one side till he is weary of that, and then turns to the other, but still in his bed, when it is far in the day and work is to be done, as the door is moved, but not removed; and so his business is neglected and his opportunities are let slip. See the sluggard's character.

1. He is one that does not care to get out of his bed, but seems to be hung upon it, *as the door upon the hinges*. Bodily ease, too much consulted, is the sad occasion of many a spiritual disease. Those that love sleep will prove in the end to have loved death.
2. He does not care to get forward with his business; in that he stirs to and fro a little, but to no purpose; he is where he was. Slothful professors turn, in profession, like *the door upon the hinges*. The world and the flesh are the two hinges on which they are hung, and though they move in a course of external services, have got into road of duties, and tread around in them like the horse in the mill, yet they get no good, they get no ground, they are never the nearer heaven — sinners unchanged, saints unimproved.

PROVERBS 26:15

THE DISGRACE OF SLOTHFULNESS

The sluggard has now, with much ado, got out of his bed, but he might as well have lain there still for any thing he is likely to bring to pass in his work, so awkwardly does he go about it. Observe,

1. The pretence he makes for his slothfulness: He *hides his hand in his bosom* for fear of cold; next to his warm bed in his warm bosom. Or he pretends that he is lame, as some do that make a trade of begging; something ails his hand; he would have it thought that it is blistered with yesterday's hard work. Or it intimates, in general, his aversion to business; he has tried, and his hands are not used to labour, and therefore he hugs himself in his own ease and cares for nobody. Note, It is common for

those that will not do their duty to pretend they cannot. *I cannot dig,*
◀2168 Luke 16:3.

2. The prejudice he sustains by his slothfulness. He himself is the loser by it, for he starves himself: *It grieves him to bring his hand to his mouth,* that is, he cannot find in his heart to feed himself, but dreads, as if it were a mighty toil, to lift his hand to his head. It is an elegant hyperbole, aggravating his sin, that he cannot endure to take the least pains, no, not for the greatest profit, and showing how his sin is his punishment. Those that are slothful in the business of religion will not be at the pains to feed their own souls with the word of God, the bread of life, nor to fetch in promised blessings by prayer, though they might have them for the fetching.

◀2166 PROVERBS 26:16

THE DISGRACE OF SLOTHFULNESS

Observe,

1. The high opinion which the sluggard has of himself, notwithstanding the gross absurdity and folly of his slothfulness: He thinks himself *wiser than seven men*, than seven wise men, for they are such as *can render a reason*. It is the wisdom of a man to be able to *render a reason*, of a good man to be able to give *a reason of the hope that is in him*, ◀4085 1 Peter 3:15. What we do we should be able to *render a reason* for, though perhaps we may not have wit enough to show the fallacy of every objection against it. He that takes pains in religion can render a good reason for it; he knows that he is working for a good Master and that *his labour shall not be in vain*. But *the sluggard* thinks himself *wiser than seven* such; for let seven such persuade him to be diligent, with all the reasons they can render for it, it is to no purpose; his own determination, he thinks, answer enough to them and all their reasons.

2. The reference that this has to his slothfulness. It is *the sluggard*, above all men, that is thus self-conceited; for,

(1.) His good opinion of himself is the cause of his slothfulness; he will not take pains to get wisdom because he thinks he is wise enough already.

A conceit of the sufficiency of our attainments is a great enemy to our improvement.

(2.) His slothfulness is the cause of his good opinion of himself. If he would but take pains to examine himself, and compare himself with the laws of wisdom, he would have other thoughts of himself. Indulged slothfulness is at the bottom of prevailing self-conceitedness. Nay,

(3.) So wretchedly besotted is he that he takes his slothfulness to be his wisdom; he thinks it is his wisdom to make much of himself, and take all the ease he can get, and do no more in religion than he needs must, to avoid suffering, to sit still and see what other people do, that he may have the pleasure of finding fault with them. Of such sluggards, who are proud of that which is their shame, their is little hope, v. 12.

~~2057~~ PROVERBS 26:17

HATRED AND STRIFE

1. That which is here condemned is *meddling with strife that belongs not to us*. If we must not be hasty to strive in our own cause (~~2058~~ Proverbs 25:8), much less in other people's, especially theirs that we are no way related to or concerned in, but light on accidentally as we pass by. If we can be instrumental to make peace between those that are at variance we must do it, though we should thereby get the ill-will of both sides, at least while they are in their heat; but to make ourselves busy in other men's matters, and parties in other men's quarrels, is not only to court our own trouble, but to thrust ourselves into temptation. *Who made me a judge?* Let them end it, as they began it, between themselves.

2. We are cautioned against it because of the danger it exposes us to; it is like taking a snarling cur *by the ears*, that will snap at you and bite you; you had better have let him alone, for you cannot get clear of him when you would, and must thank yourselves if you come off with a wound and dishonour. He that has got a *dog by the ears*, if he lets him go he flies at him, if he keeps his hold, he has his hands full, and can do nothing else. Let every one *with quietness work and mind his own business*, and not with unquietness quarrel and meddle with other people's business.

~~2188~~ PROVERBS 26:18-19

HATRED AND STRIFE

See here,

1. How mischievous those are that make no scruple of *deceiving their neighbours*; they are *as madmen that cast firebrands, arrows, and death*, so much hurt may they do by their deceits. They value themselves upon it as polite cunning men, but really they are *as madmen*. There is not a greater madness in the world than a wilful sin. It is not only the passionate furious man, but the malicious deceitful man, that is *a madman*; he does in effect *cast fire-brands, arrows, and death*; he does more mischief than he can imagine. Fraud and falsehood burn like fire-brands, kill, even at a distance, like arrows.

2. See how frivolous the excuse is which men commonly make for the mischief they do, that they did it in a jest; with this they think to turn it off when they are reprov'd for it, *Am not I in sport?* But it will prove dangerous playing with fire and jesting with edge-tools. Not that those are to be commended who are captious, and can take no jest (those that themselves are *wise must suffer fools*, ~~4719~~ 2 Corinthians 11:19, 20), but those are certainly to be condemned who are any way abusive to their neighbours, impose upon their credulity, cheat them in their bargains with them, tell lies to them or tell lies of them, give them ill language, or sully their reputation, and then think to excuse it by saying that they did but jest. *Am not I in sport?* He that sins in jest must repent in earnest, or his sin will be his ruin. Truth is too valuable a thing to be sold for a jest, and so is the reputation of our neighbour. By lying and slandering in jest men learn themselves, and teach others, to lie and slander in earnest; and a false report, raised in mirth, may be spread in malice; besides, if a man may tell a lie to make himself merry, why not to make himself rich, and so *truth quite perishes*, and men *teach their tongues to tell lies*, ~~2495~~ Jeremiah 9:5. If men would consider that a lie comes from the devil, and brings to hell-fire, surely that would spoil the sport of it; it is *casting arrows and death* to themselves.

~~183~~ PROVERBS 26:20-22

HATRED AND STRIFE

Contention is as a fire; it heats the spirit, burns up all that is good, and puts families and societies into a flame. Now here we are told how that fire is commonly kindled and kept burning, that we may avoid the occasions of strife and so prevent the mischievous consequences of it. If then we would keep the peace,

1. We must not give ear to *talebearers*, for they feed the fire of contention with fuel; nay, they spread it with combustible matter; the tales they carry are fireballs. Those who by insinuating base characters, revealing secrets, and misrepresenting words and actions, do what they can to make relations, friends, and neighbours, jealous one of another, to alienate them one from another, and sow discord among them, are to be banished out of families and all societies, and then strife will as surely cease as the fire will go out when it has no fuel; the contenders will better understand one another and come to a better temper; old stories will soon be forgotten when there are no new ones told to keep up the remembrance of them, and both sides will see how they have been imposed upon by a common enemy. Whisperers and backbiters are incendiaries not to be suffered. To illustrate this, he repeats (v. 22) what he had said before (~~188~~ Proverbs 18:8), that *the words of a tale-bearer are as wounds*, deep and dangerous wounds, wounds in the vitals. They wound the reputation of him who is belied, and perhaps the wound proves incurable, and even the plaster of a recantation (which yet can seldom be obtained) may not prove wide enough for it. They wound the love and charity which he to whom they are spoken ought to have for his neighbour and give a fatal stab to friendship and Christian fellowship. We must therefore not only not be tale-bearers ourselves at any time, nor ever do any ill offices, but we should not give the least countenance to those that are.

2. We must not associate with peevish passionate people, that are exceptions, and apt to put the worst constructions upon everything, that pick quarrels upon the least occasion, and are quick, and high, and hot, in resenting affronts. These are *contentious men*, that *kindle strife*, v. 21. The less we have to do with such the better, for it will be very difficult to avoid quarrelling with those that are quarrelsome.

PROVERBS 26:23

HATRED AND STRIFE

This may be meant either,

1. Of a *wicked heart* showing itself in *burning lips*, furious, passionate, outrageous words, burning in malice, and persecuting those to whom, or of whom, they are spoken; ill words and ill-will agree as well together as a *potsherd* and the *dross of silver*, which, now that the pot is broken and the dross separated from the silver, are fit to be thrown together to the dunghill.
2. Or of a *wicked heart* disguising itself with *burning lips*, burning with the professions of love and friendship, and even persecuting a man with flatteries; this is *like a potsherd covered with the scum or dross of silver*, with which one that is weak may be imposed upon, as if it were of some value, but a wise man is soon aware of the cheat. This sense agrees with the following verses.

PROVERBS 26:24-26

HATRED AND STRIFE

There is cause to complain, not only of the want of sincerity in men's profession of friendship, and that they do not love so well as they pretend nor will serve their friends so much as they promise, but, which is much worse, of wicked designs in the profession of friendship, and the making of it subservient to the most malicious intentions. This is here spoken of as a common thing (v. 24): *He that hates his neighbour*, and is contriving to do him a mischief, yet *dissembles with his lips*, professes to have a respect for him and to be ready to serve him, talks kindly with him, as Cain with Abel, asks, *Art thou in health, my brother?* as Joab to Amasa, that his malice may not be suspected and guarded against, and so he may have the fairer opportunity to execute the purposes of it, this man *lays up deceit within him*, that is, he keeps in his mind the mischief he intends to do his neighbour till he catches him at an advantage. This is malice which has no

less of the subtlety than it has of the venom of the old serpent in it. Now, as to this matter, we are here cautioned,

1. Not to be so foolish as to suffer ourselves to be imposed upon by the pretensions of friendship. Remember to distrust when a man *speaks fair*; be not too forward to *believe him* unless you know him well, for it is possible there may be *seven abominations in his heart*, a great many projects of mischief against you, which he is labouring so industriously to conceal with his fair speech. Satan is an enemy that hates us, and yet in his temptations speaks fair, as he did to Eve, but it is madness to give credit to him, *for there are seven abominations in his heart; seven other spirits* does one unclean spirit bring *more wicked than himself*.

2. Not to be so wicked as to impose upon any with a profession of friendship; for, though the fraud may be carried on plausibly awhile, it will be brought to light, v. 26. He *whose hatred is covered by deceit* will one time or other be discovered, and *his wickedness shown*, to his shame and confusion, *before the whole congregation*; and nothing will do more to make a man odious to all companies. Love (says one) is the best armour, but the worst cloak, and will serve dissemblers as the disguise which Ahab put on and perished in.

~~3127~~ PROVERBS 26:27

HATRED AND STRIFE

See here,

1. What pains men take to do mischief to others. As they put a force upon themselves by concealing their design with a profession of friendship, so they put themselves to a great deal of labour to bring it about; it is *digging a pit*, it is *rolling a stone*, hard work, and yet men will not stick at it to gratify their passion and revenge.

2. What preparation they hereby make of mischief to themselves. Their violent dealing will return upon their own heads; they shall themselves *fall into the pit they digged*, and the stone they rolled *will return upon them*, ~~3105~~ Psalm 7:15, 16; 9:15, 16. The righteous God will take the wise, not only *in their own craftiness*, but in their own cruelty. It is the plotter's doom. Haman is hanged on a gallows of his own preparing.

— *nec lex est justior ulla*
Quam necis artifices arte perire sua —

*Nor is there any law more just than that
the contrivers of destruction should perish by their own arts.*

PROVERBS 26:28

HATRED AND STRIFE

There are two sorts of lies equally detestable: —

- 1.** A slandering lie, which avowedly hates those it is spoken of: *A lying tongue hates those that are afflicted by it*; it afflicts them by calumnies and reproaches because it hates them, and can thus smite them secretly where they are without defence; and it hates them because it has afflicted them and made them its enemies. The mischief of this is open and obvious; it afflicts, it hates, and owns it, and every body sees it.
- 2.** A flattering lie, which secretly works the ruin of those it is spoken to. In the former the mischief is plain, and men guard against it as well as they can, but in this it is little suspected, and men betray themselves by being credulous of their own praises and the compliments that are passed upon them. A wise man therefore will be more afraid of a flatterer that kisses and kills than of a slanderer that proclaims war.