

Answer Not a Fool

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Proverbs 26:4 reads like this: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” The message seems clear enough: Don’t *be* a fool the way you *answer* a fool.



We can be certain that verse is not telling us that we should *never* respond to a fool, because the next verse goes on to say, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” Far from being contradictory, these two verses complement each other. They inform you that when (if) you deem it appropriate to correct, instruct, or rebuke a fool, you must do so in a manner that is likely to expose (and hopefully correct) his folly, but never in a manner that lowers you to his level.

So what does Proverbs 26:4 mean? What would it look like for you to answer a fool according to his folly, and thus become like him yourself? It will first be helpful to note how the book of Proverbs describes the fool in relation to receiving correction or instruction from others.

12:15 – “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

17:10 – “A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.”

18:2 – “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his own opinion.”

23:9 – “Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words.”

There’s nothing complex here. The fool may be identified first by his aversion to correction and instruction. He does not appreciate having his folly exposed by others. Second, fools don’t know when to be quiet. They love to vent and quarrel rather than listen.

18:2 (again) – “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his own opinion.”

18:6 – “A fool’s lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.”

18:7 – “A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.”

20:3 – “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.”

Given these descriptions of the fool, it’s not hard to determine at least one appropriate application of Proverbs 26:4:

Avoid quarreling!

When you quarrel, you make yourself like the fool. Even if you are the right one in the quarrel, your manner of getting your point across (i.e., through quarreling) makes you guilty of folly.

17:14 – “The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out.”

20:3 (again) – “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.”

29:9 – “If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet.”

There are many other places in the book of Proverbs that address this issue— instructions about restraining temper, making words few, using aptly chosen words rather than spewing out the first thing that comes to mind, being persuasive through sweetness of speech, and so forth. So it is not always wrong to engage the fool in conversation or to respond (appropriately) to his folly. You will have plenty of opportunities to apply these principles in a society such as ours, where man’s folly is becoming increasingly evident. But in these situations, rest assured that one standard is always right: Do not quarrel! “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.”

I leave you with Paul’s instructions to Timothy, and although you may not be a Bible teacher like Timothy, there is much here for you to heed in your interactions with others:

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:23-26)