

WHAT, WHEN AND WHY

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. (PROVERBS 26: 4 & 5)

At first glance, our theme verses for today seem to contain contradictory messages. “Do not answer a fool according to his folly” (verse 4); “Answer a fool according to his folly” (verse 5). Actually, they're complementary and it takes a bit of our old friend, Wisdom, to know what, when and why to answer a “fool.”

The opening section of Proverbs 26 has a lot to say about speaking to, acting like, or becoming a fool. For the time being, let's consider what we're told in regard to answering or responding. I like what the Jewish Talmud says about these two verses – verse 4 speaks of foolish comments that can/should be ignored; verse 5 refers to erroneous ideas that, without correction, could be dangerous or misleading.

It usually accomplishes little to nothing when we debate an argumentative, blustery, big-talking know-it-all. A total waste of time, energy and emotion. I've fallen into that trap more times than I'd like to admit, and I must confess that on occasion I've played the fool.

Sure, sometimes we have to confront the illogical or just plain wrong statement of things. Let's admit it, though: most of the time we should just let foolish statements go. Or, as we're told in verse 4, we could become like what we're arguing against. In fact, the word, “you,” in there is an emphatic tense, indicating (lest we think we're above it) “you, even you!”

Know what, when or why to respond ... or let it go.

DISCUSS

Do you ever find yourself in useless arguments where no one is convinced of anything?

How willing are you to let it go?

JUST WALK ON BY

Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own.
(PROVERBS 26:17)

I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure there's not a whole lot that's positive to be gained by picking up a dog by its ears. I can't imagine any dog that would like it, and I can't think of any good, purposeful, even beneficial reason I should ever do it. Unless I want to be bitten or scratched, I suppose. In short, it wouldn't be in the best interest of either of us. It just wouldn't be any of my business.

And that seems to be the point of today's theme verse. It's sort of amusing that following four verses depicting the "sluggard" or lazy person, we finally read of someone taking action. And, of course, it's the wrong action. "Driving in someone else's lane," as one of my friends puts it.

It's easy to get caught up in that sort of thing on occasion. We see a situation and offer a "harmless comment." We discern that what this argument really needs is "my unbiased opinion." And suddenly, we're in the middle of something we shouldn't even be on the perimeter of. And just like we saw in our previous devotional, we play the fool.

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you. (1 Thessalonians 4: 11)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4: 29)

Caring for each other often means loving enough to get out of the way.

DISCUSS

Where do you draw the line between offering help and staying out of the way ...
in your family ... with your friends ... among those you minister with?