

**1. The Antisocial Speech/Behavior of the Fool (v1-9)**  
**a. The Fool Isolates Himself and Alienates Others (v1-3)**

*Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire;  
 he breaks out against all sound judgment.*

<sup>2</sup> *A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,  
 but only in expressing his opinion.*

<sup>3</sup> *When wickedness comes, contempt comes also,  
 and with dishonor comes disgrace.*

Bruce Waltke translates verse 1 as:

“The one who separates himself seeks self-gratification;  
 against all sound judgment he starts a quarrel.”

We’ve seen this word “desire” before in Proverbs.

Desire can be a good thing – when what you desire is right and proper!  
 But the image here is of someone who seeks his own desire –  
 someone who is hiding from others in order to pursue his own selfish ways.

The fool engages in antisocial speech and behavior.

We were created to need one another.

Back in the creation narrative –

in Genesis 2, God says that it was *not good* for the man to be alone.

All throughout chapter 1 God creates something, and then God sees that it is good –  
 and he says that it is good.

But it is *not good* for man to be alone.

We were made for community – made for society.

Now there is nothing wrong with taking a retreat!

Sometimes our Lord Jesus went alone into a desolate place to pray.

The image here is of “breaking out”

(which Waltke rightly translates “starts a quarrel”).

But the point of a retreat is to prepare for love and service!

I think of the early monastic movement.

We often think of monks as engaging in a life of retreat and isolation.

But if the desert fathers had *actually* lived in isolation,  
we never would have heard of them!  
They lived on the outskirts of the community –  
but they were integral parts of it!  
People would go out into the desert to seek their wisdom and counsel.

Daniel the Stylite lived on a pillar for 33 years.  
For 33 years he stood on a pillar north of Constantinople.  
He would stand and pray all day.  
And then he would lie down to sleep.

You might think that he was isolated.

But when the kings of Constantinople and Lazica  
could not agree on the terms of a treaty,  
they decided to set the case before Daniel.  
So they came to Daniel's pillar,  
and Daniel was able to help mediate between them.

They did not seek their own desires –  
they sought to humble themselves before God.  
Therefore, even in their “retreat” they did not isolate themselves.

In the same way, the second verse warns against having a closed mind and an open mouth.  
“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.”

Make sure that you listen well!  
We all have a tendency to think that *I am* right.  
But make sure that you have *actually* understood the other person!  
I am not always good at this!

Sometimes I have failed to listen well –  
and when that happens, I need to repent!  
Because the wise takes pleasure in understanding.  
The wise *wants* to understand the other person.

Do you want to understand others?  
Maybe at this point you realize that you *should* want to understand others.  
That's a good start.

Now, build on it!  
Practice wanting to understand others!

You do know that you can *practice* attitudes, right?  
That's what repentance is all about!  
Turning away from the attitudes and actions that got us in this mess,  
and replacing them with good attitudes and actions!

Some people think that this is hypocrisy.  
But it's not hypocrisy to do the right thing when you don't feel like it.  
It's hypocrisy to *pretend* that you are doing the right thing  
when in fact you're not!

Verse 3 then forecasts the future of the fool:

“When wickedness comes, contempt comes also, and with dishonor comes disgrace.”

Antisocial behavior and words will result in disgrace and humiliation.

It may not happen immediately.

It may take years, decades, even generations!

But those who follow the path of wickedness will end up with disgrace.

#### **b. The Fool Sets Himself Up for Trouble (v4-8)**

Verses 4-8 are all about words – and how the fool sets himself up for trouble.

Both verse 4 and verse 8 talk about “the words” –

the misanthropic speech of the fool, the whisperer.

<sup>4</sup> *The words of a man's mouth are deep waters;  
the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.*

We often think of “depth” in terms of being “profound.”

Not so much in Hebrew!

Let me give you the other uses of “deep” in Proverbs:

Prov 20:5 – “Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water;

but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

(In other words, as long as it remains “deep” it's not going to do any good)

Prov 22:14 – “the mouth of a strange woman is a deep pit; he that is abhorred of the  
LORD shall fall therein.”

Prov 23:27 – “For a whore is a deep ditch; and a strange woman is a narrow pit.”

Notice the contrast:

The fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.

A bubbling brook is *not* deep.

That which is deep is inaccessible and not useful.

Deep waters are dangerous.  
But the fountain of wisdom is accessible – a bubbling brook is refreshing and useful!

Verses 5-7 then show how the fool uses words to get in trouble:

<sup>5</sup> *It is not good to be partial to<sup>[a]</sup> the wicked  
or to deprive the righteous of justice.*

There have been a lot of stories in recent weeks about police violence.  
I'm not going to try to take sides in a particular case right now.

Verse 5 is talking about a basic principle of justice.  
My concern is with the principle that *it is not good* to deprive the righteous of justice.

When a policeman swears an oath to protect his community,  
that oath *must mean* that he will testify *against his fellow policeman*  
if his fellow policeman is in the wrong.  
Otherwise, the only difference between the police and the gangs  
is that the police are wearing badges.

Are you committed to justice?  
Then be willing to hold your own party to the standard of justice!

Otherwise, you're in verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> *A fool's lips walk into a fight,  
and his mouth invites a beating.*

He came ready to harm others –  
his words were intended to tear down the opposition –  
but instead, he just “invites a beating.”  
In light of verse 5, it is possible that the fool is calling for the beating of the innocent.

And in the case of the officer who refuses to testify against his fellow-policeman,  
he *is* in effect calling for the punishment of the innocent.  
In a just society, the policeman says, “brother, I'll have your back every day –  
but ‘having your back’ means correcting you when you are wrong!”

If ‘having your back’ means letting you get away with murder – or even assault –  
that's not even kind!

It is not kind to let your friend destroy himself!

Okay, I'll stop with policemen and turn to a subject I know better:

Pastors.

Verse 7:

<sup>7</sup> *A fool's mouth is his ruin,  
and his lips are a snare to his soul.*

You've heard about situations where pastors misbehave  
and churches let them go to the next church...

Sometimes it is a matter of genuine indifference.  
Other times, it is a case of culpable charity.

What do I mean by "culpable charity"?

Culpable charity is when you think the best of someone who doesn't deserve it.  
Follow this out.

A young pastor is found guilty of "inappropriate touching."

The elders think, "Oh, he's just a young fellow – he just made a mistake."

"He's learned his lesson – he won't do it again."

"Let's cut him a break."

So they rebuke him – and then encourage him to take a call elsewhere...

I call this "culpable charity" towards this young man.

It feels like charity – "we're giving him another chance" –  
but *really*, they are not *loving* him.

Remember verse 2: "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,  
but only in expressing his opinion."

Rather, they should take the time to understand this young man,  
and to disciple him (and therefore discipline him) through this.

It is hard to *actually* love people.

And when you get down into the muck and mess of people's real lives,  
it's enough to help to sympathize with those who show "culpable charity."  
It's so much easier to punt and say, "Not my problem!"

I've done that too often...

"A fool's mouth is his ruin,  
and his lips are a snare to his soul."

His lips get him in trouble because he overreacts – he says things that he shouldn't.

And verse expands on this:

<sup>8</sup> *The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels;  
they go down into the inner parts of the body.*

Notice that this is talking about the effect of gossip on others.

Don't you just love hearing some juicy gossip?!  
Those delicious morsels may taste nice and juicy,  
but they are destructive to the community.  
Again we see the antisocial behavior of the fool.  
He engages in behavior that harms the community –  
while promoting himself.

In this context, at first verse 9 might seem out of place:

### **c. The Fool Plunders the Community (v9)**

<sup>9</sup> *Whoever is slack in his work  
is a brother to him who destroys.*

How is laziness related to gossip and injustice?

Because the one who is slack in his work  
the one who is passive and careless in his work –  
is a brother to the plunderer (the word “destroy” is a good translation,  
but it might be too strong in English for what is being said here).  
The one who slacks off and does not work hard  
has the same effect as a plunderer.

The plunderer takes away your food and your things – leaving you with nothing.  
The one who is slack also leaves you with nothing –  
by misusing time.

There is an active plundering – but there is also a passive plundering.

## **2. The Defense of the Righteous in the LORD (v10-11)**

<sup>10</sup> *The name of the LORD is a strong tower;  
the righteous man runs into it and is safe.*

<sup>11</sup> *A rich man's wealth is his strong city,  
and like a high wall in his imagination.*

Verses 10-11 then contrast the refuge of the righteous and the rich.

In verse 10 – “the name of the LORD is a strong tower”

In verse 11 – the rich man's wealth is his strong city.

Which one will prove stronger?

The second line of each verse also has a comparison:

In verse 10 the righteous man runs into [the name of the LORD] and is *high*.

In verse 11 the rich man's wealth is like a *high* wall in his imagination.

It's a tough one to translate.

In English if you say that the righteous man runs into it and is high,

that will communicate something very different than in Hebrew!

He is safe – he “protected on high” (as Waltke puts it).

What is a safe refuge?

You may have a lot of money.

And yes, a lot of money comes in handy in a lot of situations!

But all the money in the world cannot protect you from death.

All the money in the world can only help you erect a high wall *in your imagination*.

You can imagine yourself secure – but you're not.

The only refuge that is indeed a strong tower is the name of the LORD.

The name of Yahweh.

My help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

What does that look like practically?

How do you *practice* taking refuge in the LORD?

It means that you renounce your trust in your other towers.

It means that you confess *to God* and *to others*

that the LORD is my trust – my refuge – my strong tower.

And you begin to act accordingly.

If you think about it, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me”

is a good summary of what Proverbs is saying!

And, in fact, that is how Solomon lays out the wise approach to conflict in verses 12-21.

### **3. The Wise Approach to Conflict and Speech (v12-21)**

#### **a. The Incurable Fool vs. the Teachable Wise (v12-15)**

We start with the incurable fool and the teachableness of wisdom.

The wise man recognizes that he does *not* know everything,

and so he is always seeking knowledge.

The fool doesn't think that he needs to know anything more!

<sup>12</sup> *Before destruction a man's heart is haughty,  
but humility comes before honor.*

Humble yourself before the Lord, and *he* will lift you up.

Likewise, the haughty doesn't listen well to others:

<sup>13</sup> *If one gives an answer before he hears,  
it is his folly and shame.*

The fool doesn't bother to pay attention –  
he is quick to answer (whether he has understood or not!).

Verses 14-15 then take us back over the same ground as verses 12-13

<sup>14</sup> *A man's spirit will endure sickness,  
but a crushed spirit who can bear?*

In verse 12 we heard about the haughty – who wind up broken –  
and the humble – whose spirit can endure sickness.

Why should you live this way?  
Because it fits the world that you live in!  
The world that *God made*.

And

<sup>15</sup> *An intelligent heart acquires knowledge,  
and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.*

Are you eager to learn?  
Are you seeking knowledge?

The wise will always be learning.  
The fool will never learn.

#### **b. Seeking Justice in the Midst of Conflict (v16-19)**

Verses 16-19 then return to the theme of Justice that was introduced earlier in the chapter.

<sup>16</sup> *A man's gift makes room for him  
and brings him before the great.*

We heard last time about the power of a bribe.



Here it is referred to as a “gift.”

But the image is the same.

It’s not a *good* thing – but it is a fact of life in this fallen world,  
that if you want to get a seat at the table,  
you may have to pay for it!

“Pay to play” they call it.

In American politics there is *all sorts* of legal bribery.

We have all sorts of rules to make it more difficult –  
but everyone in Washington knows that if you play by the rules,  
you can make a lot of money!

Think about it:

if you vote in favor of that industry often enough,  
and if you serve on the committee that oversees that industry,  
then when you lose the next election,  
they’ll hire you for a *lot* of money  
in order to lobby on behalf of that industry!

It’s all legal!

But money talks!

Proverbs isn’t saying that this is a good thing.  
Proverbs is saying that this is a thing!

You can legislate all you want,  
you can ban everything on the planet –  
  
and money will still talk.

So be careful how you use money!

Then verse 17:

<sup>17</sup> *The one who states his case first seems right,  
until the other comes and examines him.*

Ah! Isn’t this so true!

There is a story that I know of a pastor  
who was deposed from the ministry for his negligence and incompetence.  
I just discovered this week that he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.

That makes a difference in the story!

He probably needed to resign from the pastorate in order to deal with his disease,  
but knowing about his Parkinson’s makes a difference!

Cross-examination is important!

The wise man will not jump to conclusions,  
but will seek out knowledge – will seek out the evidence!

How often have we read an article in the last few months and said,  
“Aha! Now we know *this* about Covid-19!”  
Only to discover a few weeks later that there was more to the story.

The wise man will not rush to judgment.

You might say, “But I saw the video!”

Yes, you saw a video.  
But the author of that video was presenting an argument.  
Did the video actually record the whole event?!  
Or did they leave out crucial information?

“Uh, well, I don’t know...”

Then be careful how you pass judgment!

It’s fine to say, “Wow! That’s horrible. Based on what I saw in that video,  
that was wicked and despicable.”

But if you want *justice* – then do not rush to judgment!  
Rush to judgment is how too many men –  
especially black men –  
have been wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit.

Okay – but let’s say you have a case where there is no clear verdict.  
And let’s use a property dispute –  
an argument over who owns that donkey.

If it was a cow, you could say cook it and split the meat!  
But no one wants to eat a donkey!

Verse 18 has an answer:

<sup>18</sup> *The lot puts an end to quarrels  
and decides between powerful contenders.*

If the evidence is insufficient to vindicate either party,  
then cast lots – draw straws – flip a coin!

Solomon was once faced with this sort of situation –  
two women who were contending over one child.  
In that case, his threat to cut the child in half revealed the true mother –  
but that won't always work!

Sometimes you just have to say, Lord, we leave the decision to you!  
That's not saying that the lot is an infallible tool that will always bring justice.  
If that was the case, then there's no point in having courts!  
Just flip a coin and let God decide!!

The point is that this contention has to stop.  
It will do more harm if it is allowed to continue,  
so you have to get both parties to agree to settle this by casting lots.

Verse 19 then concludes the section on conflict  
by pointing out that:

*<sup>19</sup> A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city,  
and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.*

Many of you have brothers.  
Isn't that true?  
Close relatives are the hardest to win over once they are deeply offended.

Once that offense has sunk into their soul – they will never get over it!

Our passage concludes by looking at the *fruit* of a life of wisdom.

### **c. The Power of Speech (v20-21)**

Verse 20 starts with the temporal fruit of the tongue:

*<sup>20</sup> From the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach is satisfied;  
he is satisfied by the yield of his lips.*

What you say to others will bear fruit in your own life.  
Are you speaking good things – wise things – encouraging things – to others?  
Then you can expect the fruit of goodness, wisdom, and encouragement in your life.

(Conversely, if you are speaking angry, bitter, hurtful things to others –  
then you can expect the fruit of anger, bitterness, and hurt in your life)

What fruit are you planting with your lips?

Verse 21 then moves to the eternal fruit of the tongue.

<sup>21</sup> *Death and life are in the power of the tongue,  
and those who love it [the tongue] will eat its fruits.*

Remember that both the wise and the foolish love the tongue!

The fool loves the tongue.

He cannot get enough of listening to himself talk!

He loves the tongue.

And he will eat its fruits – its deadly fruits in his case,  
because he has planted death through his foolish talk.

But the wise also loves the tongue.

Not just so that he can hear himself talk –

but so that he might gain wisdom and knowledge.

And why does he want wisdom and knowledge?

Because he seeks *life*.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding;  
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (3:4-5)

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life –  
come to him and live!