

Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves... and Watch Out for Fools (Proverbs 26)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life
Zionsville Fellowship | February 15, 2026 | Drew Hunter

What does Proverbs have to do with Jesus?

Proverbs is framed as a father giving wisdom to his royal sons. He is giving them wisdom to live well in God's world. And we've seen that Jesus is the true royal and wise Son. He navigated the world with perfect wisdom. And then he died to give his salvation to foolish sinners who trust him.

But he doesn't just forgive our sin and folly—he also begins to make us wise. He sends us into the world to live with wisdom. And he often gave us wisdom that matched Proverbs.

Here is one of his well-known sayings that matches what we'll see in Proverbs today. Jesus said, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Doves were viewed as innocent, but also easily deceived and ensnared in a trap. So Jesus calls us to be innocent like doves, but not naïve like them. Instead, we are to be wise as serpents. We are to be shrewd with people so that we are not ensnared in traps. Innocent, but not ignorant. Watch out for certain kinds of people—and navigate relationships wisely.

This is also the message of Proverbs 26.

The Proverbs father sends his sons into the world—and he doesn't want them to be naïve. And in particular, they need to learn how to read people. They need to discern different types of people, and navigate those relationships wisely.

Proverbs 26 is part of a section we're calling *Advanced Wisdom*. As we've seen, Proverbs moves from *beginning* to *elementary* to *intermediate* to *advanced* wisdom. The poetry and lessons get increasingly complex as the book progresses.

Earlier on it gave simple contrasts of the wise and foolish, the righteous and wicked. Proverbs 26 now teaches us to identify seven types of foolish people. The goal is not for us to judgmentally condemn others—but to be discerning.

We need to identify these seven types of foolish people for two reasons. First, so we can learn to navigate our encounters with them wisely. And second, so we can identify and repent of tendencies in our own lives that are like them.

Jesus sends us out to be innocent as doves, yet wise as serpents. Proverbs helps us do this by identifying seven character-types to wisely navigate. We'll see the fool, the sluggard, the meddler, the scoffing joker, the division-creators, the deceitful glazer, and the schemer.

1. The Fool (v. 1–11)

First, the fool.

The first eleven verses give a portrait of the fool. Foolishness in Proverbs is not about someone's mental capacities. The fool has a chosen outlook on life. Folly is not mainly intellectual—it's spiritual and moral. They don't seek true wisdom, so they don't gain it—but the problem is that they still think they have it.

So, how can you spot them? And how can you spot the tendencies in your own life? Here are six marks of a fool.

First, honor doesn't fit them.

The point of verse 1 is that when you see a fool honored, you sense that it's not right. It just doesn't fit. Verse 1, "Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool." Snow doesn't belong in summer, and rain doesn't belong in the harvest. In the same way, honor doesn't fit with a fool.

Honor is a way of expressing esteem—it's a way of affirming that someone is living in a way that fits with reality as God made it. God made reality a certain way—and we are all to discern reality, and adjust to it. And honor is meant for those things that honor reality.

But a fool doesn't live in line with reality. A fool doesn't honor God or his design. So honor is not fitting for a fool. Our society is increasingly honoring things that don't align with reality. One way we can serve our community well is by honoring wisdom and virtue and humility.

Second, they aren't motivated by reason.

Verse 3, "A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools." You try to use reason with this person, but it doesn't work. They keep doing what they're going to do. And the image compares them to an animal—horses and donkeys need physical force to get them motivated; and so does a fool.

Third, they require a discerning response.

Verse 4 and 5 seem like a contradiction at first. One says we should *not* answer a fool according to his folly. The other says we *should* answer a fool according to his folly. Some say this is a clear contradiction. But they are placed right next to one another to get us to think about it. They interpret each other. Let's think it through.

Verse 4 says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” This means we should not speak to fools the way they speak to you. If he is raging at you, don’t rage back. If he is shading the truth, don’t shade the truth back. If she is using personal insults, don’t give personal insults back. If she is immature, impetuous, or vindictive; don’t respond in the same way. Because you’ll then become like them.

But then verse 5 says, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” Now what does this mean—that we *should* answer a fool according to his folly? This means we should answer him in a way that corrects his folly. And the goal is so he will not be wise in his own eyes—he needs to be humbled.

Jesus did this all the time. They tried to trap him with a deceptive question, and he responded with truth, and yet wisely trapped them back. They raged against him, and he remained calm and spoke in a way that exposed their evil.

Fourth, they can’t be trusted with important tasks.

This is verse 6, “Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence.” You have an important message to send to someone, so you trust this person to deliver it. But they mess it up. And the result is that you’re cutting off your own feet—why? Because the message will be delivered poorly and create problems.

Verse 10 is similar. If you hire fools—then whatever you trust them with will cause more problems: “Like an archer who wounds everyone is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard.” You can’t rush the process to hire someone who is going to create more problems. Many people have hiring regrets.

In the ministry world, there’s a common saying: churches tend to hire fast, and fire slow. This is because they trust people quickly, but they can be naïve. They hire too quickly, without testing character. And then when problems come, they are endlessly patient and hopeful, but it leads to more and more problems. So, wisdom says to hire slower and, when necessary, part ways faster—for the good of everyone.

If you’re hiring for a company, of course you can give people second chances. But you do this with wisdom—you ensure there’s enough of a trajectory of character to trust.

Fifth, fools can quote wisdom, but they don’t live it.

Some people may have all sorts of wise sayings stored up in their memory. They can quote the Bible and give other one-liners. It makes them seem wise. But they don’t actually know how to apply these wisely in their lives. Verse 7 shows us what this is like: “Like a lame man’s legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools.” The wisdom comes out of the mouth, but then it doesn’t function in their lives.

They read great books about the wise and good life; but their relationships are a disaster. They read great books about leadership, but they don't lead people well. They can refer to a recent sermon by memory, but they don't put it in practice. They can write a book, give a TED talk, lead a Bible study—but their life doesn't line up.

I remember a friend of mine telling me about a great book on pastoral ministry. But he knew the author. And he said, "It's a great book—but the guy doesn't live it out."

And sometimes the wisdom they know can actually cause harm. This is verse 9: "Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools." A drunkard stumbling around with thorn bush is going to cause problems. That's like a fool who can quote Bible verses and wise sayings.

I've shared the studies about which marriages in society are the healthiest and happiest—and which are the least.ⁱ The happiest and least abusive are marriages are those with true Christian husbands who are regularly engaged in the local church. The unhappiest and most abusive—are those with nominal Christian husbands—these are Christians in name only. The man says he is a Christian, but he doesn't live it out or engage in the church. He knows just enough of the Bible to quote it like a weapon; but not to live it out with love.

Finally, folly doesn't learn from mistakes.

They do something foolish, and it doesn't work out well for them. But rather than gaining wisdom and changing; they keep doing it again. Here's a shocking and gross image to make the point—verse 11, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly."

This is the nature of addictions. They create a rush of relief or joy—but it's short lived. And the joy in the rest of life gets diminished. So we rely even more on the rush to experience joy again. But even that joy gets diminished. We end up in downward spiral. That's what happens with all addictions—drugs, alcohol, sexual lust, seeking fame.

And not just addictions—but anything foolish we do in life. We agree that it was foolish; but then later we do it again.

These are the marks of a fool. Before we move on, let's recognize that folly lies on a spectrum.ⁱⁱ

Think of foolishness like spice levels.

- The first are *mild-spice fools*. They lack self-understanding and don't see how their behaviors impact others. They don't respect boundaries, and they don't know that it's frustrating. They are often well-meaning and kind, but they lack relational connection. They don't see how they take advantage of people's kindness.

Many of us have some measure of this in our lives.
They need someone to come alongside and help them see this.

- Then there are *medium-spice fools*.
These are not so much ignorant as willful.
They know what they're doing. They know they are manipulative.
They present some facts so that they can technically say they aren't lying.
They don't have empathy to perceive how their behaviors are impacting people.
They don't really think the people around them are truly frustrated with them.
These people need a less gentle approach—they need to be addressed directly.
They need to admit that they have some level of willful blindness and selfish manipulation.
- Then there are *hot-spice fools*.
When a fool gets to this level, they don't have self-awareness anymore.
They are so entrenched in their self-absorption, that they don't even see it.
They think they're getting away with all their manipulation; they don't see how obvious it is.
They are not vulnerable. They lack empathy.
They will lie to you to your face. And they still think they're doing a good job pulling it off.
- And, of course, there is *ghost-pepper spice*... which are the people that make the news.

There are two implications of all of this.

First, let's not think that we don't have any foolishness in us. The reason why Proverbs warns against foolishness so much is because its seed is in us. So, we need to be sensitive to how we are often still foolish. And one problem with all the spice levels—is that they don't see their foolishness clearly. Which means you may think you aren't foolish, but you are.

Second, this chapter is here to give us discernment to navigate the world wisely. We need to be able to identify fools so we can either avoid them or wisely help them. But it's naïve to treat everyone as if they aren't like this.

2. The Sluggard (v. 12–16)

The second character-type is the sluggard.

Proverbs usually presents them with a humorous caricature—but they are real, and we may have those tendencies in us, and they can be problematic.

So, how can we spot them? And how can we spot the tendencies in your own life? Verses 12–16 give us five descriptions of the sluggard. And like with the fool, there are also a spectrum of sluggard spice levels.

First, he thinks he's smarter than everyone else.

This is verse 12: "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." This doesn't explicitly refer to the sluggard, but he's probably in view.

Notice how it's placed in this chapter. The previous 11 verses were about the fool. Then after this, verses 13–16 all mention the sluggard. Verse 12 is a hinge between the two sections. It says the fool is bad, but the one who is wise in his own eyes is worse.

Who is that? Here's how we know that's the sluggard. Look at verse 16, which ends the section on the sluggard: "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly." The sluggard is worse than the fool, because the sluggard is wise in his own eyes.

The insight here is that sluggard isn't just lazy— he is narcissistic. He thinks he knows everything, so he doesn't seek or listen to advice. He is proud, and pride makes us unable to receive wisdom. It makes us unteachable.

This is the leader who doesn't seek leadership wisdom because he thinks he already knows. This is the pastor who doesn't think he needs biblical and theological training. This is the person who can't hold a tune, but insists on doing the solo. One author said this is the person who is often wrong, but never in doubt.ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, the sluggard makes excuses.

Here's what he sounds like—verse 13: "The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" There's no lion in the road. But because there is a slight chance that maybe a lion could be there, he can't go outside. He can't go to work.

You need a job and say, "no one is hiring right now."

You need to go to school and say, "I don't feel well today."

You need to mow the yard, and say, "It's way too hot, and it's probably going to rain."

You don't respond to people's calls and emails and texts for weeks, and say, "I'm busy."

You have a bad attitude around the family and you say, "I had a hard day, okay?"

The sluggard doesn't think he's lazy. He thinks he's a realist. He justifies his decisions with a sliver of truth to convince himself that he's in the right.

Third, he's undisciplined with his sleep.

There he is lying in bed in verse 14: "As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed." Sleep is important and good—and so is getting up and being useful to the world.

Fourth, he doesn't finish what he starts.

This is verse 15, "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth." It's just too much.

He had enough energy to get the food out of the fridge, but not to put it away.

He had enough energy to eat the food, but not put his dishes away.

He had enough energy to wash the clothes, but not enough to put them away.

He had enough motivation to write the contract, but not enough to get everything done.

People always have to finish or deal with the details left undone.

This person's philosophy of life and work is, "it's good enough."

Of course, he blames anyone who mentions that something's left unfinished.

He says, "don't rush me."

Or, "You think it's a mess, but I know where everything is."

Or, "listen, I'm just letting the dishes soak so they're easier to clean later. It's a strategy."

Or, "you don't need to be a perfectionist. It's fine."

Finally, he speaks with unwarranted confidence.

Verse 16, "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly."

You have seven men who can answer sensibly—but the sluggard can't. But he doesn't see it. Why? Because he's wise in his own eyes.

This is the person who hears all these wise people around him—and disagrees with them.

He thinks he knows better. He is very confident in his perspective.

But it's not warranted, and he can't see it. Because he's prideful and has a self-centered view of the world. He is confident in his opinions, but he shouldn't be, and he can't see it.

This is why, at bottom, the issue is pride. And this is why the solution is the fear of the Lord—a humble and reverent trust in the Lord. Or, true and ongoing repentance and faith.

The rest of the chapter introduces us to a few more character types in quick succession.

3. The Meddler (v. 17)

The third is the meddler.

This person involves himself in a quarrel that has nothing to do with him—and it only makes things worse. The image is verse 17, "Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears."

You're taking a walk in your neighborhood. A dog-walking neighbor passes on your right. You reach over and yank the dog's ears. You're going to have a problem.

Yes, we are to be peace-makers. Yes, there is a place to address two people who are fighting. But we need wisdom to not get unnecessarily involved. And certainly not to enter the fray and argue with them.

One time someone asked Jesus in a crowd, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Do you know how Jesus responded? He said, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” (Luke 12:13–14). And then he told them to watch out for covetousness and greed. He didn’t join the argument; he just pointed to the deeper issue.

4. The Scoffing Joker (v. 18–19)

The fourth is the scoffing joker.

You know the person—or maybe you do this—who is a bit passive aggressive with jokes? They say something hurtful, and when the person is hurt, they say, “I was just kidding.” Or they cheat, and when they’re caught, they say, “I was just kidding... I knew you’d see it.” Or they do a prank that crosses the line, and then just says to chill out because it was a joke.

What’s that like? Verses 18–19, “Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, “I am only joking!”

Or what about when someone says something that provokes a response, and then says, “wow, you’re being defensive.” Yes, some people may be too defensive. But why are they defensive? Because the person was being offensive; they were attacking. And then they blame the person who responds.

5. The Division-Creator (v. 20–22)

The fifth is the division-creator.

There are several types of people that create division in verses 20–22.

The first is the whisperer—which is the person who shares gossip or slander. Verse 20 says sharing gossip is what keeps the fire of conflict going: “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.” The gossip is called a whisperer because it’s always done privately. This person shares the information only to select people—the people they know will listen. They subtly influence other people to share their negative view of someone else. They spread bad news about someone behind their back. This ends up stirring people up and leading to conflict.

There are spice levels to gossip.

- Some are mild gossips—they don't have self-control with sharing. They have concerns or negative views of people, and they share that with others. They don't go directly to the people they are concerned with—instead, they share their view with others because they want to be affirmed in their view. The worst is when that's shared as a prayer request.
- The medium spice gossips know what they are doing—they are gaining influence to get momentum for their view or their cause. They are creating dissent to get their way. They may shade the truth a bit, or present half-truths, or frame things in an overly negative way. This is how coups happen in churches and neighborhoods and governments. It's how media manipulates public opinion. This is very common—and a reason it works is because people don't discern it. They like and trust and respect the person, and it all seems true.
- The ghost-pepper gossips no longer even feel bad about it—they are working angles and even lying about people to get their way.

The Bible repeatedly warns about how this damages community. Titus 3:9 says “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, 11 knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”

Another division-creator is someone who quarrels.

Verse 21 says, “As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.” Some people like conflict. They like heated debate. They thrive off of disagreement.

That's not a virtue. They are often discontent, focused on the negatives, and condescending to people. This leads to conflict in families, neighborhoods, classes, and churches.

Then one more division-creator is the person who *listens* to gossip.

It's not just people who spread gossip who are the problem. It's those who give an ear to it. And we are all tempted to do this—because there's something strangely satisfying about hearing bad news about people. Verse 22, “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”

One reason why gossip spreads is because people like hearing it. Maybe they like hearing bad news about people. Or maybe they are high on empathy, and they like being the kind of person people can trust with concerns or bad reports. And so they end up being the community's verbal trash collector. That's also not a virtue.

6. The Deceitful Glazer (v. 23–26)

The sixth character type is the deceitful glazer.

You know what glazing is—it's a form of hyper flattery. It's over-the-top praise that doesn't really map onto reality. And sometimes people glaze a person while they actually despise them. They use flattery to manipulate them.

Verse 23 uses the image of glazing on cheap pottery for this: "Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart." The lips are speaking all kinds of praise, but the heart is filled with hate. The next verses say they speak graciously, but don't believe them—you have to learn to discern what they really think.

7. The Schemer (v. 27–28)

Finally, the seventh type is the schemer.

Verse 27 says this person digs a pit for someone to fall into. But they end up falling into it themselves. They are plotting to work angles and manipulate situations. As they do this, they are like someone rolling a stone up a hill. But in the end, that stone will come back on them and roll them over. They will receive poetic justice.

Conclusion

Those are the seven character types of foolish people.

How do we respond to this? Not with prideful judgmentalism of others. We respond in three ways: with humility, trust, and discernment.

First, humility.

We remember that all of us have these kinds of tendencies within us. There are not two types of people born into the world—those who tend toward wisdom, and those who tend toward folly. There are only sinners—those made in God's image to live with wisdom, and yet who have a powerful tendency toward folly.

So, we always begin with the humble posture of repentance.

We recognize that part of our folly is that we don't even see how much foolishness is in us.

We don't see how our motives work.

We don't see the impact of our behaviors on others.

We think we have no spice, but others experience us as way too spicy.

So, we humbly open ourselves to God's searching, and the Spirit's conviction.

Second, we respond with trust.

We trust Christ as the only truly wise one, and we trust him for forgiveness. He was innocent as a dove, and wise as a serpent. He came into the foolish world as the truly wise and royal Son. He didn't fall for deceptive traps. He brilliantly navigated relationships.

And he ultimately submitted himself to be overcome with foolishness and evil. And yet he knew that the schemer's trap that they set for him would backfire on them. He was crucified, but he rose. And he died to bring forgiveness to all who trust him.

It is the height of wisdom to receive his grace and trust him for forgiveness.

If you are not yet a Christian, I wonder if this chapter helps you understand yourself. A Christian is someone who sees this chapter and sees enough of themselves in it. And they see Jesus as the truly wise one who die for fools like us. And so we receive his forgiveness.

Then, third, we respond with discernment.

That's what this chapter offers us. As we follow Christ, we grown in wisdom and discernment. We learn to read people like this chapter teaches us. We learn to spot gossip, and scheming, and division-creators, and fools, and sluggards. And we learn how to wisely navigate relationships with them.

We learn that Jesus sent us into the world to be innocent as doves, and wise as serpents.

From this posture of humility and repentance, we can learn to discern people's character. We can watch people—and not judge them, but discern what they're like. And we won't be fooled. We won't be deceived. We won't be naïve.

- If you want to be married, this chapter will save you the headaches of marrying a fool.
- If you are married to someone with these foolish tendencies, this chapter gives you wisdom for how to navigate that relationship, and loving help them see themselves. Or if you are married, and you see these tendencies in you—you can confess this to your spouse and invite their help to understand how your actions hurt them.
- If you are a parent, this gives you a model of how to train your children.

Proverbs says folly is bound up in the heart of a child. So one goal of parenting is to replace that folly with wisdom. We train them to have discernment—to learn to identify fools and sluggards and meddlers and whisperers. And to identify this in their own hearts so they can humbly repent and trust Christ for change.

One reason why our society is seemingly so unhinged from reality right now is the breakdown of the family and parents not raising their kids with wisdom.

Without the wisdom of this chapter, we send them naively into the world. Many young men and women enter foolish friend groups, foolish marriages, foolish financial deals—and it's because their parents didn't equip them with discernment.

- And for the children and youth—maybe your parents aren't guiding you. Our Father in heaven gave you Proverbs to give you the wisdom we need. Immerse yourself in this book, and learn from other wise men and women.
- And for those involved in vocational or civic leadership—this is wisdom for leadership. Proverbs is written to raise up men and women to lead and shape society. The wise need to step in to lead so that the seven character-types in this chapter don't. Our own local and national government needs the wise to step in and lead.
- Finally, for our whole church family—the church is to be a community of wisdom in a world of folly. Jesus sent us to be innocent as doves and wise as serpents. This means we are to cultivate a community that is less and less like the character-types in this chapter. We used to be like this, and this was our trajectory without Christ's intervening grace. And so we receive this wisdom, and we help one another grow to become more like Christ.

ⁱ See Nancy Pearcy, *Toxic Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 35-39. See also Brad Wilcox's studies.

ⁱⁱ The idea of a spectrum, or levels, of folly comes from Dan Allender and Tremper Longman. Some of the descriptions below were generally drawn from Chuck DeGroat, *Toughest People to Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 88ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of these examples are from Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 124.