

A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs

Chapter 26: 1-28: The Foolish and the Wise

Verses 1-3: Proverbs describe the 'fool' as one who ignores wisdom, foolishness as a character flaw, on the other hand the wise are equipped with wisdom of the sages. The fool forfeits his honor or dignity as a human being. The fool needs a 'rod for the back' which could mean corrective punishment for criminal or immoral behavior, a reprimand that offers opportunity to reform; however, Proverbs don't show much confidence in changing a 'fool's' character! Attempt to change a fool is like a bird trying to fly but is incapacitated; Proverbs seem to give up on fools. Adverse weather damages crops, snow in summer or rain during harvest, similarly, honoring a divisive person signals something rotten in the one who does it. Ancient world believed in the power of curses, but an innocent person is free from negative power of speech [words]; the wise use power of words to heal and establish harmony.

Verses 4-11: The fool does not require an answer to his/her foolish outbursts except when misinterpreting the Torah [Law of Moses], what the commandments intend or in matters of life and death. One cannot have a rational dialogue with a fool; don't waste your wisdom on one who does not listen. In what seem contradictory sayings, Proverbs try to balance between right approach to a fool and affirmation of truth: A fool could be dangerous when you try to reason with him/her. The wise could affirm the truth for the sake of the fool's understanding. Don't give the fool avenue to spread untruth! One must be prudent in dealing with the foolish because it is futile effort to change an unwilling fool; it is like 'tying a stone in a sling', the stone will not eject from the sling! Fools adore their own foolishness. Proverbs warn of drunken fools, their behavior, words are like a shooter shooting aimlessly at passersby. Fools who keep repeating their non-sensical utterances and actions are like a 'dog returning to its vomit'. A dignified [wise] person learns from mistakes; the fool arrogantly sticks to his foolishness.

Verses 12-16: While elaborating the damage a fool can inflict on society, Proverbs warn the wise that they too can become fools if they think they are wise in their own estimation [parable of the Pharisee and publican-Luke 18:9-14]. The wise is humble and open to good counsel; they seek greater understanding of the mysteries of life, however if they boast about their wisdom, they will be self-deceiving! Proverbs have zero esteem for the lazy' the lazy sits in one's own room and says that 'there is a lion in the street, and it is going to kill me' or he/she is like a 'door that swings on its hinge' crawls into his/her bed and wouldn't even get up to eat; laziness is directionless life.

Verses 17-28: One who unnecessarily interferes in the quarrels of other people is like one who grabs a passing ferocious dog by its ear. Be prudent before meddling in other people's business. A fool might say 'he was joking' when caught defrauding or deceiving a neighbor, the damage is already done! Gossip funnels discord and many quarrels are roused by gossip. Quarrels end when stop gossiping; it is like fire that goes out without supply of wood. One cannot trust a gossiper/slanderer; he/she goes about flattering themselves and their supporters, but their hearts are malicious. Deceitful plans engulf the deceiver, it is like one who 'rolls a stone is struck by the stone itself'. 'A deceitful tongue hates those it crushes and a smooth mouth works

ruin' [verse 28]. What begins with hatred turns to negative speech and actions to destroy [often the innocent]; it is a mind that revels in chaos and ruin. Dignity, honor of human person derives from God's wisdom. The foolish forfeit their honor; realization of folly and change of heart can restore honor. No one impose honor on others who do not have it. Proverbs offer skills to act wisely [prudently] in all different life situations!

Father Jose