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Living Amongst Fools

Skillful Living

Proverbs 26:1-28

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Jesus said, "Wide is the road that leads to destruction and many will be those who will find it. Narrow is the road that leads to life; few there will be that find it." If we take Jesus' words and just move them back into the Book of Proverbs, then we would say, "Many will live life as fools; few will live life with skill." If that's true, then you have to wrestle with the implication that if I am going to live life as a skillful person, I'm going to have to learn how to be skillful amongst the fools. Now that's not very politically correct sounding; it is biblically correct. Living skillfully among the skillful, that's pretty easy. But learning to live skillfully among fools, that's very difficult. That's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs 26. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the Book of Proverbs. We're up to chapter 26, just taking a chapter at a time, not necessarily taking all the verses in a chapter. In chapter 26 I want to organize this around four categories of fools. These are not new fools; these are fools we've seen a lot in the Book of Proverbs, but that's basically the way the chapter is organized. So you have the "*Know-it-all Fool*"; you have the "*Sluggard*"; you have what I'm going to call the "*Agitator*" and you have the "*Deceiver*". Now as we approach this, this morning, we're not going to approach it so much from the standpoint that we should not be one of these fools. While that's true and rather obvious and we've talked a lot about that, we're going to approach it more from the standpoint of: *"What does it look like to live skillfully among these fools*?" So that's the focus we're going to take. Verses 1through12 talk about the Know-it-all Fool. Verse 1:

> **Like snow in summer and like rain in harvest,**
> **So honor is not fitting for a fool.**

We've talked about this before. There are multiple Hebrew words that are translated **fool** in English. This is the one that refers to what we've called the *Know-it-all Fool*. This is a word that is used seventy times in the Old Testament, sixty-seven of those seventy times are in the Book of Proverbs. So it would be right to say the Know-it-all Fool is a main character in the Book of Proverbs. This is someone who is thick-headed, someone who is unteachable, someone who doesn't want to be told what to do. This is someone who thinks they already know it all. So even if this person's life is in shambles, "Don't tell me what to do!" Why? "Because I already know it all." So that's the Know-it-all Fool; he's a main character in the Book of Proverbs, and what verse 1 is saying is that we should not **honor**, value, or celebrate the fools among us. Just like snow is out of place in the summer, so honoring a fool is out of place for the wise. If you track the language—honor means to value; value means to celebrate; so think of it this way in our culture. "What is a celebrity?" The answer is, "Someone we celebrate." So you can learn a lot about a culture by looking at who we as a culture celebrate. Who are the people we honor? Who are the people we value? Now I can think of a lot of people and I can think of a lot of professions that I would honor, that I would value. But those don't tend to be the celebrities in our culture. As a matter of fact, oftentimes in our culture the celebrities are highly dysfunctional people. We as a culture celebrate fools. Basically think of it this way: what you applaud, you encourage more of. So the more we applaud, the more we celebrate the fool, the more of that behavior we're going to get. Now we can't do a lot to change that, but we can look at our own lives and discipline ourselves not to

celebrate, not to applaud, not to give value to those who live as fools. That's verse 1. Verses 4 and 5 are very practical advice:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
Or you will also be like him.
Answer a fool as his folly *deserves,*
That he not be wise in his own eyes.

It kind of seems almost like a contradiction. Verse 4: *Don't answer*. Verse 5: *Do answer*. But the basic idea is this: It takes a high degree of skill to figure out when is the time to answer and when is the time to be quiet and stay out of it. Verse 4 is saying, "*Don't let the fool suck you into his folly or you just end up sounding like a fool yourself."* The Know-it-all Fool is a big mouth. They're where you work; they're in your school; they're in your neighborhood; for some of you they're in your home. And the Know-it-all Fool, the big mouth, is always trying to suck you into their folly. Sometimes the most skillful thing you can do is just be quiet. Just stay out of it; don't get sucked in to the foolishness. Now not only should we think of this in terms of face-to-face conversations, but it is also helpful to think of it in terms of social media—not getting sucked into the foolishness and ending up sounding like a fool yourself. Verse 5 then is saying, "*But there* are *strategic moments when it is best to respond, in order that the Know-it-all Fool not walk away thinking he's right about everything."* Sometimes a skillful response can trigger something that might possibly cause the fool to rethink something. But you have to assess the moments, not just get caught up in the emotion and the agitation and all that's going on—the drama—but rather thinking, "Is this the moment?" "Is this the time?" "Is this the place where I think possibly I could respond with love, with respect, with compassion, but respond in a way that maybe this would be heard and maybe some sort of change might take place?" So how do we respond to the Know-it-all Fool among us? The answer is: you have to develop the skill to know when it's best to just be quiet and stay out of it or you're just going to end up sounding like a fool yourself, or capturing those moments when I can say something at a strategic moment where it might actually be heard.

Now I would contend the only way to actually carry out verses 4 and 5 is to have a quiet, peaceful soul. What I mean by that is if you are a person who feeds on the 24-hour news cycles, is on social media, is constantly agitated by the media and all these other sources in our culture, where your emotions are just below the surface, and all it's going to take is the slightest provocation and you're going to go off, you're never going to be able to live out verses 4 and 5. The fool is going to say something; it's going to push your button and off you go, and you're going to end up sounding just like the fool. I think part of our responsibility as Christians to be good stewards of the gospel is to be very disciplined about our intake so that we are not constantly feeding on that which is doing so much damage to our souls. Instead I'm quiet; I'm peaceful in my soul, and in that moment I can be quiet so I can respond correctly. In the moment I can understand a strategic moment to say the right thing that isn't driven by all kinds of frustration and agitation and anger. So you have to figure out, "What does that mean for you to maintain a quiet, healthy soul in order to understand when to be quiet and when to strategically respond." Verse 9 is a great imagery:

***Like* a thorn *which* falls into the hand of a drunkard,**
So is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

Basically the idea is this: A fool may quote a proverb, but the fool is still a fool. Just because the fool is saying something—maybe we would broaden it out—the fool may quote the Bible; the fool may say something from Scripture; the fool may promote a biblical idea or value or truth to which

we might say, "Yeah, I agree with that," but the fool does it in such a way that they are still a fool. So it's the idea that just because somebody says the right thing doesn't mean you want to hook your wagon to those horses. So we as a church, because of our size, everybody wants a piece; everybody wants us on board with their agenda. Almost weekly there is some person or organization that wants us on board, and sometimes we would say, "You know, what they're doing we would agree with. That is a biblical value; that is a biblical truth. We do agree with that particular agenda." But the problem is the way they go about it is so foolish that we don't want our name attached because it ends up doing so much damage to the gospel. Think of it this way: Let's imagine that you get on social media. You identify yourself as a Christian; you're quoting something from the Bible; you're promoting some sort of a biblical value, some sort of a biblical truth, but you just kind of go off like a fool. And then my neighbor says to me, "Hey, doesn't that guy go to your church?" What would you like me to say? I think what I would like to say is, "Yes, but he's a fool." (*laughter*) Now I promise you I won't say that (*laughter*) but I *will* think it. But you've created a very awkward conversation. One of the things that we have to accept is, "Hey, we're in this together." And when you get on social media and you go off, do you realize how much damage you've done to my ability to present the gospel to my neighbor? Yeah, it may have been Scripture; it may even have been a position I would agree with, but you acted like a fool and did significant damage to the cause of Christ. That's the basic idea.

The imagery is of a **drunkard** with a **thorn** bush, kind of like a stick off a thorn tree. It has long, pointy thorns that are very sharp. So under the best of circumstances it takes a lot of finesse and a lot of care or there are going to be a lot of people bleeding. But the drunkard is incapable of finesse, is incapable of that level of care. So the imagery in verse 9 is the drunkard has the thorn branch and because he's drunk, he's bleeding and everybody around him is bleeding because he's just thrashing this thorn branch around everywhere. That's the imagery of a fool who takes something like a Scripture or a proverb or a truth, but uses it so recklessly that everybody ends up bleeding and there only is damage to the cause of Christ. The last one for the Know-it-all Fool is verse 11:

> **Like a dog that returns to its vomit**
> **Is a fool who repeats his folly.**

Now this is intentionally crude. Nobody likes that moment when the dog vomits and then for reasons only God knows, (*laughter*) he feels the need to come back, sniff it, lick it, eat it. It's supposed to be crude; it's supposed to be grotesque; it's like, "Yuck!" That's describing the Know-it-all Fool who just keeps making the same stupid mistakes. Some people like to say hindsight is 20/20. I disagree. I've been at this for over thirty years; it's not 20/20. I know lots of people who keep making the same stupid mistake again and again and again. The Know-it-all Fool doesn't want anybody telling them what to do. "I don't want you to teach me; I don't want you to tell me what to do." The Know-it-all Fool already knows everything and because of that, just keeps making the same stupid mistakes. So what is our responsibility? We don't celebrate or honor them; we don't applaud them. We need to be skillful enough to know when to respond and when to just be quiet—and we should never underestimate the amount of damage they can do again and again.

The second category starts in verse 13. That's the *Sluggard*. The sluggard is also a main character in the Book of Proverbs. This is chapter 26. The sluggard has shown up in ten chapters, so clearly a main character. The sluggard is lazy; the sluggard is unmotivated. The sluggard is a taker, not a giver. The sluggard seeks to work the system to use and manipulate everybody else to their advantage, and somehow the sluggard thinks that's smart, thinks it's clever. The sluggard has lost the sense that work is about something that's noble; it's about something that gives life dignity and

meaning and purpose, and is about my contribution to the flourishing of the community. It's a good and a right and a noble thing, but the sluggard doesn't see it that way. The sluggard is just working the system. Verse 13:

The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road!
A lion is in the open square!"

It's kind of an exaggerated, humorous excuse. Why did the sluggard not go to work today? Because there's a lion on the road; there's a lion in the office. If I step out the door, the lion will eat me. It's kind of this humorous, exaggerated sense in which the sluggard will come up with any excuse not to work today. Verse 14:

As the door turns on its hinges,
So *does* the sluggard on his bed.

This is great imagery. So think of a door; it hangs on its hinges and while it moves, it never really goes anywhere, just back and forth, back and forth. So take the door, lay it down, and the sluggard is hinged to the bed, and flops over this way, flops over that way, flops over this way. That's all the sluggard does—never actually goes anywhere, just flops back and forth on the bed. That's the imagery of verse 14. Verse 15:

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again.

The sluggard is so lazy, he doesn't even have the energy to feed himself. Verse 16:

The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
Than seven men who can give a discreet answer.

So the sluggard thinks he's so smart he can work the system, take advantage of everyone else and get something for nothing. Again, what the sluggard lacks is the true understanding that work is good; work is noble; work is about giving life dignity and meaning and purpose; work is my contribution to the flourishing of the community. The sluggard doesn't see it that way. He just thinks he's smarter than everybody else because he can work the system.

My opinion would be this is a huge problem in our culture today. I would suggest that we as Americans are losing our work ethic. We're becoming sluggards. We've lost our sense that work is noble and it's good and it's right and it gives life dignity. It's become much more about figuring out how to work the system and get something for nothing. So the question we're wrestling with is, "What is our role as skillful people? What is our role in response to the sluggard?" I think biblically the answer is very simple and it's very straight forward. We should never enable the sluggard. Whether you're talking about you as an individual, whether you're talking about us collectively as the church, or whether you're talking about us collectively as the government, we should not enable the sluggard. Paul was very clear when he wrote to the Thessalonians who were having a problem with this. He simply said, *"If they don't work, then don't let them eat."* Now there are people among us that legitimately need help. By all means we should help them, but they would never be described as a sluggard. We're talking about sluggards, people that are fully capable of working but choose not to. They're lazy; they're unmotivated; they're selfish; they're takers; they're working the system. In our culture we want to wrap up all the ways that we enable the sluggard in language

like, "It's kind; it's loving; it's compassionate." We need to come to grips with the fact it's not. We're contributing to the destruction of a human life. This person just starts cycling down, losing their dignity, losing their purpose; they're wasting their life away, and to contribute to that and make it possible, that's not loving, that's not compassionate; that's not kind. Sometimes life's lessons are hard and sometimes you have to face hard lessons to bring about necessary change.

The third category starts in verse 17, what I'm calling the *Agitator*. You could call this fool the *quarreler* or the *arguer*, but it's the agitator. It's someone we've seen a lot in the Book of Proverbs. We've talked about this before. There are certain people, when they go into a room the room tenses up because people in the room know there's a really good possibility there's going to be conflict because this person creates conflict everywhere they go. It's the agitator. Verse 17:

> ***Like* one who takes a dog by the ears**
> **Is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him.**

The agitator, the meddler, the contentious person is always meddling in everybody else's business, and always creating conflict. The imagery of *grabbing a dog by the ears* is not a picture of you going home and taking little Fifi by the ears and he licks you on the face. Dogs in the ancient Near East were wild animals. You grab a dog by the ears; he's going to bite you in the face. Maybe in our contemporary culture it would be like grabbing a coyote by the ears. He's going to bite you in the face. That's the agitator, the arguer, the quarreler, always sticking his or her nose into everybody's business and always creating conflict. Verse 18 and 19:

> **Like a madman who throws**
> **Firebrands, arrows and death,**
> **So is the man who deceives his neighbor,**
> **And says, "Was I not joking?"**

It's the idea of this fool always creating conflict. It's like someone with weapons, shooting and throwing and injuring people, and then when his neighbor gets injured he says, "Oh, hey, I was just joking, didn't mean it, hope you're okay." That's the *agitator*. Everywhere they go they create conflict, and there are wounds and there's a body count and it's like, "Hey, well I didn't mean that. They started it; it's not my fault." So the question we're wrestling with is, "How do we respond to that?" Obviously we should not be that person, but how do we respond? Frankly, there are agitators everywhere you go. There are agitators where you work, in your neighborhood, at your school, in a lot of families. They are just those people that always start conflict. So what's our role? Verse 20:

> **For lack of wood the fire goes out,**
> **And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down.**

The **whisperer** in Hebrew is the slanderer, the gossiper, the person that's always creating conflict. Half-truths, misinformation, innuendo—all of these kind of fall in the category of the whisperer. The imagery is that's a **fire**. If you want the fire to go out, stop throwing wood on the fire; stop stoking the fire. To put a little twist on the old country western song, "*Don't* put another log on the fire..." because you're just keeping the fire going. The truth is there are some of you here this morning, with all sincerity you're tired of the conflict; you're tired of the anger; you're tired of all of this emotion that defines our culture today, and you're very sincerely tired of it. You say, "I'm just weary of it all," but you're so unaware of your own self, you do not realize *you* keep stoking the

fire. You keep throwing a log on the fire and then you're surprised and wearied by the fact that the fire keeps burning. This is a common problem. People lack the self-awareness that we're the one throwing the log on the fire, and that's why it keeps burning. What's our responsibility? Our responsibility is to discipline ourselves to not keep fueling the fire, in hopes that the fire will go out. Verse 21:

> ***Like*** **charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire,** [so fueling the fire]
> **So is a contentious man to kindle strife.**

That's what the agitator is looking for. He's looking for fuel for the fire. I can't control everybody else, but I can decide whether I'm going to throw another log on the fire or try to help get the fire to go out. Here's the problem. Verse 22:

> **The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels,**
> **And they go down into the innermost parts of the body.**

Here's the problem: Sometimes what the agitator is saying is like a freshly baked donut. It's like, "Boy that looks good!" The problem is when people come to you and they're saying something you agree with—they're saying something that taps into your frustrations, taps into your political ideas, taps into the anger and the frustration within your own heart because you haven't managed that, you haven't disciplined that, you don't have a quiet soul—and they come along and the agitator says something and to you in that moment it's like a freshly baked donut. It's like, "This tastes really good!" So what do you do? You throw another log on the fire. You heat it up; you get the agitator more agitated, and then what happens? The agitator goes to somebody else and burns them and you say, "Hey, it wasn't my fault," to which the proverb is saying, "Yes it was. You contributed to that; you kept the agitator agitated. Instead of helping to quiet down and put the fire out, you pushed a button, so you threw a few more logs on the fire and the fire grew hotter and hotter and then that person went out and burned other people and you're partially responsible for that." This is when it's most difficult—when people are saying things to you that poke your buttons, that tap into your own frustrations, and rather than helping put the fire out, you just throw more wood on the fire—and lots of damage is done!

The last category starting in verse 23 is the *Deceiver*. Now understand, the deceiver here is specifically someone who has their own agenda, has their own purpose, has their own thing they're doing, but in order to get you on board, tells you lies—deceives you—and tells you one thing to get you on board, but there's a hidden agenda that ultimately is going to be destructive. Verse 23:

> ***Like*** **an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross**
> **Are burning lips and a wicked heart.**

Basically the idea is this: You put the silver in the fire, the dross, the impurities come to the surface; you scrape them off and then you pour them over a piece of pottery, and from a distance it looks like that's a piece of silver. It's impure. Silver on the outside, but nothing but pottery on the inside. That's the imagery. It's someone who is saying this on the outside, but deep on the inside there's another agenda; there is something else going on. Verse 24:

> **He who hates disguises *it* with his lips,**
> **But he lays up deceit in his heart.**

How should we respond? Verse 25:

When he speaks graciously, do not believe him...

One of the great needs for us as Christians in this culture is to be wise, is to be sensitive, is to be shrewd, is to not be naïve and realize there are a lot of people saying a lot of things that sound really good, but deep under the surface there's another agenda. There's something else; there's something more; there's something that you should not be a part of. Don't be deceived; don't be tricked into being part of something that ultimately is offensive to God. Verse 26:

Though his **hatred covers itself with guile,**
His wickedness will be revealed before the assembly.

Eventually it will come out and you don't want to be associated with that. Verse 27:

He who digs a pit will fall into it,
And he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him.

Eventually the truth will come out and you want to be very careful that you haven't supported something that ended up being something other than what you thought it was. That's the Deceiver Fool.

So the *Know-it-all Fool*, the *Sluggard*, the *Agitator*, and the *Deceiver*. How do we respond skillfully in a culture of fools? Jesus was talking to his disciples and he said to them, *"I send you out as sheep into the wolves."* That's a very difficult assignment. He followed it by saying, "*Then you need to be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves."* It's a very difficult assignment. If we're going to be stewards of the gospel and have credibility in our culture, we cannot come off as just another fool. We have to be more skillful than that. We have to learn to live skillful lives in a culture of fools.

Our Father, we ask this morning that You would give us what we so often lack and that is this supernatural discernment to live as skillful people, to be as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves as we steward the gospel in a culture of fools. God, give us what we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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