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Conducted by  
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**“Could you please comment on two verses in Proverbs chapter 26 which appear to be entirely contradictory. Verse 4 says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly...”; verse 5 says, “Answer a fool according to his folly...” Are not these very contradictory statements?”**

At first reading (and perhaps even at a second reading!) these verses certainly seem completely contradictory. However if we quote the verses in full they look a little less contradictory, and indeed we might even begin to think that we can see the explanation of the apparent contradiction.

Quoted in full verse 4 says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.”

Verse 5 in full says, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes”.

### **Various sorts of fools**

The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about foolishness and wisdom, and in this chapter has a few pithy comments to make on the matter of fools and foolishness. None of us would like to be regarded as fools, and likewise it would be only with great reluctance that we would regard anyone else as “a fool”. It is a designation that we should hesitate to apply to anyone, for do not we all occasionally behave in some foolish way or make foolish statements? There are however, apparently, certain individuals whom God regards as fools — who behave and talk in what is generally accepted as a foolish manner. It may be due to a lack of intelligence (and thus not be entirely their fault) or it may be due to culpable disregard for common-

sense and decency. A fool is not necessarily a knave — he may be just lacking in good sense, His eye may not be evil — just blind. Fools are often stupid to the degree, says Solomon, that they fail to learn by experience (a hard enough school). Most of us can think of instances in the past where we have lamentably failed to learn by our experiences: but Solomon is probably referring to some who *never* seem to profit from some past *faux pas* or indiscretion.

In the first verse of the chapter Solomon says that it is very unwise to try to bestow honour upon a foolish person. It would be as untimely and incongruous as snow in summer and rain at harvest time. In verse 3 he says the situation of fools is so hopeless that the only language likely to be understood by them is of physical violence — “a whip for a horse, and a rod for a fool’s back”. He further says in verses 7 and 9 that it would be a complete waste of time to expect any intelligent communication from fools, for a parable in their mouth is as a thorn piercing a drunken man’s hand. He who sends an important message by the hand of a fool is as a man who cuts his own leg off and displays the stump (v.6 New English Version). As a dog returns to its vomit so a fool returns to his folly and repeats his act of stupidity. (v.11)

It is while Solomon, the writer of the book of Proverbs, is speaking in this vein that he says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly...” and conversely “Answer a fool according to his folly...”

#### How fools should be dealt with

Proverbs often present two sides of the same truth in what is an apparently contradictory form and here, in the two verses under discussion, I believe that Solomon is merely saying that *in certain circumstances* a fool should be ignored and *in certain circumstances* he should most certainly be answered. Elsewhere in the scriptures Solomon says that there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak (Eccl. 3:7) and obviously his observation applies when one is confronted by foolishness. I think the phrase in each verse beginning with “lest” is a good guide to us in understanding the apparent contradiction in the verses, and in telling us in what circumstances we ought to keep silence and in what circumstances we ought to speak.

In verse four, therefore, Solomon says that we should “Answer *not* a fool according to his folly, *lest we also be like unto him*”. Thus in circumstances where we would be descending to the level of the foolish person in our answers, or in the way we answered, we should avoid answering at all. If we couldn’t answer without becoming as foolish as the foolish person we ought not to answer. Jesus was asked many foolish questions, but He *never* gave equally foolish answers. He put them by or gave an unexpected turn to the question and silenced the adversary. He was never inveigled into vain and puerile discussions and arguments. In other words, it seems that Solomon is saying, “Don’t answer a fool according to his folly by degrading yourself to the level of a fool and answering him in equally foolish language or manner.

On other occasions, however, it seems that foolishness deserves a swift and cutting rebuke and thus in v.5 Solomon says, “Answer a fool according to his folly, *lest he be wise in his own conceit*.” I suppose that sometimes dealing with foolishness is like dealing with small infants or children that sometimes we should ignore what they say and do, and sometimes we should sharply rebuke them. “Lest he be wise in his own conceit...” conjures up the idea that if the foolish man goes unanswered he may get the impression that he is right and that silence is to be construed as meaning that he can’t be answered. In such circumstances, says Solomon, give a telling and sharp reply that will “cut him down to size” (as Jesus did on many occasions).

This then is briefly how I understand these two verses and how I reconcile the apparently contradictory injunctions from Solomon. These verses were not written to "fools" of course, but rather for the guidance of those *who had to live with fools*. These proverbs would patently be wasted in the mouths of fools, and were therefore more for the advice of those who have to deal with fools. If we are to try to live wisely then there is an implied responsibility of trying to deal wisely with the crassly foolish. Paul says he spoke foolishly to the Corinthian Christians knowing that they who are truly wise are best able to "suffer fools gladly." (2 Cor. 11:19)

The phrase "according to his folly" means "*as his folly deserves*" and so in dealing with the foolish we are to be guided by the circumstances in each case and to speak or be silent "just as his folly deserves".

These verses are well illustrated by the foolish answer Moses gave to the rebellious Israelites (Numbers 20:10) and the wise rebuke from Job to his wife in Job 2:10.

It is perhaps worthy of note that after all that Solomon has to say about fools, he ends by making the observation that there is more hope for a fool than for the man who is wise in his own conceit. Worth thinking about?