
The Messenger



“... How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” Romans 10:15

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Listen to PROVE ALL THINGS on 730 AM WKRE, Sunday mornings from 8:15 to 8:30		

Answering a Fool

by Irvin Himmel

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit (Prov. 26:4, 5).

Here are twin statements that seem to go in opposite directions. They need to be studied together.

The Fool

Frequently in the book of Proverbs, the Hebrew word *kesil*, translated “fool,” appears. It applies to one who is dull and stupid, “but it must always be remembered that the book has in mind a man’s chosen outlook, rather than his mental equipment” (Kidner). He is “not necessarily one who is mentally weak or simple, but one who is willfully disobedient to the voice of divine wisdom” (Cundall). The word describes one who is “obstinate in that on which he has set his heart, not to be moved by reason or counsel” (*Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*).

The verses which we are now considering refer to a fool in the sense of one whose stupidity reflects his attitude, not his mental capacity. A person may have a high IQ and still be a fool. The world is full of people who are fools by choice.

A Contradiction?

“Answer not a fool according to his folly . . . answer a fool according to his folly . . .” That sounds like a contradiction. Ancient rabbis explained the passage by applying verse four to temporal matters and verse five to spiritual concerns.

The phrase “according to his folly” is “equivalent to recognizing the foolish supposition and the foolish object of his question, and thereupon considering it” (Delitzsch).

There are times and places in which a fool should not be answered according to his folly. In other circumstances it may be wise to answer the fool according to his folly. These two verses “are practical sayings which apply to life as we find it, and life is often apparently inconsistent . . . The fact is, each verse has a different purpose” (Kufeldt).

Answer Not a Fool

Generally, it is without profit to argue with a fool at his own level. Some arguments and positions are too ridiculous to honor with a reply. The defender of truth should not imitate the slanderer or scoffer in his methods of disputation. To fall in with his mode of reasoning is to allow one fool to make another. “Folly is contagious, and we are all in some danger of catching it” (*Pulpit Commentary*).

It is not necessary to understand a subject in order to argue about it. Silence is often the most effective reply to a fool’s contentions. A mud-slinger wants others to sling mud with him. But remember that he who throws mud loses ground!

Before becoming embroiled in controversy with someone, make sure you are not lowering yourself into a fool’s arena. The reason for the warning is, “lest thou also be like unto him.”

Answer a Fool

If a fool is never answered, no matter what the circumstances, he will suppose that his questions and arguments are answerless. “There is a time when it is pointless to reason with a fool, but there are also occasions when to remain silent would suggest to him that his own position is unassailable” (Cundall).

Occasionally, a fool may have to be met on his own grounds. The answer which exposes his folly may stop his mouth. Sometimes his inflated ego can be punctured.

There is a story about a preacher who was discussing various questions written out and submitted by people in his audience. He unfolded a piece of paper and read the question aloud: “When did Job’s turkey die?” The audience roared with laughter. In a matter-of-fact manner the preacher replied, “From the looks of the scratching on this paper, he hasn’t died yet.” There was another roar of laughter. The fool was answered according to his folly, “Lest he be wise to his own conceit,” then everyone was ready to move on to serious questions.

Paul, replying to false teachers who foolishly boasted of their attainments in an effort to downgrade the apostles, showed them that he could beat them at their own game. “Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly,” he wrote (II Cor. 11:1). Writing about things of which he could boast, he was careful to remind his readers, “I speak as a fool” (II Cor. 11:21, 23). Paul did not relish this kind of approach. Circumstances called for the false teachers to be answered. The apostle answered them according to their folly.

We need wisdom to know how to answer perverse and obstinate men. In some cases, to answer a fool according to his folly is unwise; in other cases, we may need to answer him according to his folly. “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Col. 4:6).

News and Notes:

Reminder: Bible Study – Every Tuesday @ 10 a.m. (Old Testament) and @ 7 p.m. (Romans)

Remember to check the prayer list for those with ongoing spiritual weaknesses and physical illnesses.

“...Pray for one another...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” James 5:16