

Answer the Fool. Or Don't

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Proverbs 26:4-5

Isn't this an interesting couple of verses? The Bible is such a beautiful book. Just when you think you understand it, just when you start to think you've heard everything it has to tell you, it throws you a curveball. I read a passage like this and I imagine the Holy Spirit with a twinkle in his eye, saying, "Ok smart guy, what are you going to do with this!?" Put back to back like this, it's like these proverbs were meant to knock us off balance.

What do we do with this? Here are two words from the Lord, two infallible bits of Biblical instruction and they seem to say exactly the opposite thing. 'Do not answer a fool according to his folly or you will become like him yourself.' Don't get sucked into a dispute with a fool. He will drag you down to his level. OK good advice. But then, "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." You can't just keep quiet! You have to respond and challenge him or he will continue to spout his foolishness and he will continue deceiving himself and others. The proverbs seem to contradict each other! Is this a mistake? Was there an editorial oversight? Did the person proofreading the original version of Proverbs get distracted during her work? No of course not. This is intentional. The writer of Proverbs intended these two verses to go back to back, and more importantly, the Holy Spirit intended these verses to go back to back.

What is the Spirit trying to tell us through this provocative pairing? The Spirit is pulling us into the real life complexity, the real life uncertainty of moral decision making. This week as I pictured it, these two proverbs put us at Thanksgiving dinner with your extended family, including your opinionated Aunt Edna. Aunt Edna, bless her, has trouble holding her tongue. Her opinions are both loud and quickly offered. So you're all settled down and the talk is pleasant and edifying and virtually out of nowhere Aunt Edna spouts a political opinion that is both ill-timed and, as far as your concerned, ill-informed. It grates you because you totally disagree and because you think this is not the place. You think it is a foolish opinion and you think Aunt Edna was foolish to offer it here where she knew it could start a fight.

In the silence after Edna's proclamation, both these proverbs come into play. In that moment, it will be like both these proverbs are sitting on your shoulder, talking to you, pulling at you. Verse 4 is leaning in to one of your ears and saying, "Don't say anything. This is Thanksgiving, just let it die. If you say something it will start a big argument, she's not going to change her opinion and you might get angry and lose your temper and say something foolish yourself." Verse 5 is whispering in your other ear, "No you can't let this go! You can't let this foolish talk just spread. You have a responsibility to stop this and maybe if you say something and put her in her place, she will think twice before opening her mouth again. You will help Aunt Edna save her from herself." There is wisdom in both those voices. There is truth in both of those voices.

By putting these verses right next to each other, the Spirit is teaching us is that godly wisdom, Spirit-led wisdom involves keeping both of these voices in tension. It's not a matter of choosing one of these voices and not the other; godly wisdom means always keeping these voices in tension. Maybe you listen to the voice of verse 5 and choose to speak up. Maybe you choose to challenge Edna. As the conversation progresses, you will still need the voice of verse 4. You can't just choose the way of verse 5 and forget about 4. At every point in the conversation, you should be asking yourself, 'should I say something else, or is this a time to pull back, even if it means letting Aunt Edna have the last word.' If you listen to the voice of verse 4 and choose not to talk, that doesn't mean you've stopped listening to verse 5. Maybe you say, "I will be quiet now, but maybe later, when we are away from the dinner table, when the family time is over, I will sit down for coffee with dear Aunt Edna." The path of wisdom keeps both these truths in constant tension.

The tension we see here isn't exclusive to these two proverbs. The whole Bible is full of these moral tensions. In the Bible, discerning our path is often not about finding one obvious way or one obvious answer

or one timeless principle which will tell us what to do; so often figuring out our moral life and staying on God's path involves keeping the proper tension between two good and godly principles. Biblically, lived truth is about keeping two good things, two true things, held in proper tension. In fact, losing the tension between these good and godly principles is often the source of error and foolishness. So, going back to Aunt Edna, the two good and godly principles are patience and forbearance on one hand (verse 4) and courage and truth-telling on the other hand (verse 5). Even though patience and forbearance are a good thing, if all you do is practice patience and forbearance, you will do wrong. You will let foolishness go unchallenged. Foolishness will fester. On the other hand, even though truth-telling and courage are a good thing, if all you do is truth telling and courage, you will do wrong. You will find yourself in a constant state of conflict. The two Biblical truths of verse 4 and 5 are not opposed to each other. They do not contradict each other; they are in a productive tension. Think of it like pitching a tent. When you pitch a tent, you have to have a line pulling the tent in one direction and a line holding up the tent in the opposite direction. You need the tension of both lines to make the tent stand. If you remove the tension from one of the lines, the tent will collapse.

The Bible is full of examples of these kinds of holy tensions. For example, the tension between works of the law and grace. God wants his children to live by his rules, and to walk in his ways. That's a clear Biblical principle. But we are also saved by grace through faith, not by our works so no one can boast. Ephesians 2. Another Biblical principle. Living the Christian life means keeping those two things constantly in fruitful tension. The Galatian church got out of balance and put all their emphasis on obedience to the law. Paul had to write them a letter to remind them of grace. The Corinthians on the other hand, were big on grace and freedom, and Paul had to rebuke them for not following God's law (1 Corinthians 5-6). You must hold both grace and works in tension.

There are many other similar tensions. There's the tension between the three-ness of God, and the oneness of God. Truth means keeping those in tension. There's the tension between the justice of God and the mercy of God; you need both to get a true sense of who God is. There's a tension between engaging the world and changing the world, and making sure that you are not corrupted by the ways of the world. You need both of those too. There's a tension between Jesus as a full human being like us and Jesus as fully God like his Father. There's the tension between the already and the not yet. There's a tension between feasting and fasting. There's a tension between how we have freedom in Christ and the call to be his servant.

So these two little proverbs are a window into the way the Bible communicates the truth of God and his ways. In the Bible, the truth about God is not given to us as a single focus or a single answer, in the Bible the truth about God is communicated to us as a holy tension, two good and true things that we must learn to hold together.

I want to finish with one other holy tension that we find in the Bible, one that I think is important for our times. That's the tension between knowledge and mystery. In the Bible, there is a tension between the knowledge of God on one hand and the mystery of God on the other hand.

On the one hand, the Bible calls us to know God and his ways. The call to know God and his ways is central to Scripture. It's in the Old Testament: Psalm 27 – "My Heart says "seek his face!" your face, O Lord, I will seek." Psalm 119:33 – "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your decrees that I may follow it to the end." It's in the New Testament: Colossians 1:9. "We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will, through all the wisdom and understanding the Spirit gives." Romans 12, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may know what God's will is; his good pleasing and perfect will." God wants us to know him. He gives the Bible to us so that we may know him. The Bible reveals God to us. We can learn about him and know his ways.

And more than that, when we build up our knowledge of God and his ways, the Bible calls us to teach those doctrines to the next generation and keep them from error. Paul tells Timothy, "what you have heard from me, keep as a pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Jesus Christ. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you." (2 Timothy 1:13-14) Jude verse 3 says: "I feel compelled to write you and urge you to

contend for the faith that was once and for all entrusted to God's holy people." That's the pole of knowing God and it is an absolutely, thoroughly Biblical pole.

But there is another Biblical message that's in tension with knowledge. The same Bible that calls us to know God and learn his ways, just as clearly teaches us that we cannot know him, that we cannot fathom his ways, and that our human frailty puts serious limits on what we can see and know and say about him. The same book of Psalms that express the desire to know God and his ways also admit that God is ultimately beyond our knowledge. We read Psalm 131 in which the Psalmist recognizes that there are matters too wonderful for him and he's learned to rest in God like a weaned child with its Mother. In Psalm 139, which I read last week, the Psalmist reflects on God's way with him and says, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me, I cannot attain it."

The book of Job is all about the limits of human understanding. After tragedy strikes Job's life, he rails at God because he can't understand why God would do this. God never explains. Instead God shows up and gives an overwhelming display of his power and glory. Job puts his hand over his mouth in submission, and he learns to trust God even though he doesn't understand. Job is praised for this posture. Job's friends on the other hand who claim to have explanations for everything are rebuked. The whole book of Job holds up the pole of mystery against the pole of knowledge.

And then there's Isaiah 55:8-9 – "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." You will never be able to fully understand God's ways.

No one pursues knowing God more vigorously than Paul and yet he always keeps his pursuit of knowledge in tension with mystery and his human limitations. At the end of Romans 9-11 after struggling mightily to figure out God's election he admits he doesn't completely get it: "O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. His judgments are unsearchable; his paths beyond all tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord and who has been his counselor, who has ever given to God that God should repay him, for from him and for him and through him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever." Paul's faith is fruitfully strung between the poles of knowledge and mystery.

Our faith needs both of these poles. If we just talk about the mystery of faith all the time, if all we say is "who can know the mind of the Lord?", if we just throw up our hands and act as if anything anyone says about God is equally true and equally valuable, we will slide into relativism and moral laziness. And we will ignore the fact that God has made himself known to us in the Bible and in Jesus.

At the same time, if all we talk about is the knowledge side of the tension, if we begin to talk as if we have all the answers and there is no mystery or uncertainty, we will be like Job's friends. And even more seriously, we can turn faith into a work, an achievement. A work of doctrine. A work of knowledge. If we put all the emphasis on knowledge, our doctrine can become a graven image made of words. That's Tim Keller's concern in his book *Counterfeit Gods* where he says this about doctrine and idolatry: "[Idolatry] occurs when people rely on the rightness of their doctrine for their standing with God rather than God himself and his grace. It's a subtle but deadly mistake...Making an idol out of doctrinal accuracy ...leads to constant internal conflict, arrogance and self-righteousness, and oppression of those whose views differ."

Doctrinal certainty is a powerful and tempting idol. It's a powerful idol because it feels so right. It feels like strong faith. When we worship this idol it feels like we are zealous for the Lord. It's a tempting idol because we like to have answers. We like to know what's right and wrong. We like to know what's true and false. We like to know who's in and who's out. We prefer 'thus saith the Lord' to 'We don't have the answers.' But what if 'we don't have the answers' is part of what the Lord saith?

It's hard work faithfully holding all these tensions through our life. It's exhausting. But we don't do it alone. The Spirit helps us and God gives us the gift of this community to help us. And most importantly, we have the clear testimony of Scripture that when we lose our way, when we get the balance wrong, our Lord Jesus Christ keeps his hold on us. The hope of my salvation and yours doesn't depend on my ability to grasp

Jesus and his way; our hope for salvation depends on Jesus' ability to grasp me. I'm going to do my level best to grasp God and his way, but that's not where my hope lies; my hope lies with his unwavering grasp on me.

Here's a thing I've noticed. What are our two favorite expressions of faith? What are the two statements of faith that we love to say together in our evening services and at funerals too. The First Q&A of the Heidelberg Catechism and the Apostles' Creed, right? We love those statements because they are an expression of our hope. Here's an interesting question: how much of those two statements is about our moral obligations, about moral rules? How much of those statements are about what we do to take hold of God? None. There are no moral rules in either of those statements. From start to finish, those statements are about what God has done for us. 'I am not my own but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.' 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.' We aren't called to do anything in these statements, nothing except believe and receive the good news. Those Creeds aren't about how I've grasped God; they are about how God has grasped me... and you...and all of us.

As we move forward through the challenges of life, trying to keep the balance, trying to hold the tensions, trying to find our way, remember what Paul said in Philippians 3:12 when he described his struggle to navigate the tensions – he said, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." As we try to keep all the beautiful tensions of our faith, and all the uncertainties of our faith, let's remember that our Lord has a firm hold of us.

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