

“Self-Deception”
Proverbs 26:1-16
May 10, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

As we continue our sermon series on the little sins of Proverbs, we come today to the sin of self-deception. Though the term self-deception doesn't appear in our chapter, or anywhere else in the book of Proverbs for that matter, the idea is found in a phrase that is repeated three times in our passage. We are warned repeatedly against being wise in our own eyes (v. 5, 12, 16). To be guilty of such a thing is to reject the true wisdom that comes from God and therefore means that we are about as far from real wisdom as possible. We are self-deceived because we think we have wisdom, though in fact we have none.

This is an especially tricky sin because by its very nature those who are most guilty of it are the very ones who are least aware of their need. If I asked you to draw up a list of all the areas where you were deceived, I have given you an impossible task. As soon as you identify an area where you have believed a lie, you cease to be self-deceived. So by the very nature of this sin, if we are to be delivered from it, we need outside help. We need to trust something or someone outside ourselves who can see what we cannot see. We have to do what airplane pilots are sometimes required to do when they lose their orientation due to poor visibility—trust their instruments.

Almost ten years ago, in July of 1999, John F. Kennedy, Jr., son of the late President Kennedy, was killed along with his wife and sister-in-law when the single engine plane he was piloting crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the crash was “The pilot's failure to maintain control of the airplane during a descent over water at night, which was a result of spatial disorientation.” I understand that it is possible for a pilot to lose his sense of the horizon, so that all his feelings tell him that he is maintaining altitude when he is actually in a sharp descent. In that situation, a pilot must learn to trust his instruments. If a crash is to be avoided, he or she must ignore feelings and do what feels very wrong simply because the instruments are telling a different story than the feelings. The pilot must not be wise in his own eyes, but trust the wisdom of the instruments.

What is true for navigating the skies as a pilot is also true for navigating life. We must learn the skill of instrument flying, and the instrument we must trust is the wisdom from God, embodied in Jesus. Apart from him, we are prone to “spatial disorientation” so that what we think is up is actually down, and vice versa. So we must be inclined to distrust our own sense of what we need and trust God's instead. If we think we need more money, more

acceptance, a better wardrobe or a newer car, wisdom would have us call those conclusions into question and look to a deeper wisdom. That's what the first half of Proverbs 26 is about. Note three truths we learn here about avoiding self-deception by learning to trust God's wisdom instead of our own.

I. Hope for the Self-Deceived – Recognizing Your Inner Fool

This is a very cleverly-designed passage whose purpose is to shake us out of our self-deception, of being wise in our own eyes. It does so by describing two levels of foolishness. A Level 1 fool is described in the first 11 verses of the chapter, a description we will consider more carefully in just a moment. Then we come to verse 12, a verse that forms a climax as it describes someone who is worse than a Level 1 fool. **“Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”** Think of this as a Level 2 fool, someone who has been confirmed in his foolishness. The mark of a Level 2 fool is that he is wise in his own eyes. He has gone through the first level of foolishness without seeing himself as a fool. What he needs, and what we need as well, is to get in touch with the inner fool. Until we are able to see ourselves as lacking wisdom within ourselves, we will not be ready to receive the true wisdom from God.

Our task in this first point is to see ourselves in this portrait of the fool. I notice five characteristics of the fool in these verses. First, the harm he does increases with his elevation. The more honor he's given, the more harm he does. **“Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool”** (v. 1). Moisture from rain or snow would ruin the grain harvest by causing it to rot. Rain is essential during the season when the grain is growing, but once it is mature and ready to be harvested, rain becomes destructive. So it is with a fool. If he is put out of his place by being elevated to a high position with some significant power, he becomes destructive. It is better to keep him in a place of no influence where he lacks the power to do any harm. The same thing is said again in verse 8. **“Like one who binds the stone in the sling is one who gives honor to a fool.”** The sling was a very simple, but effective weapon. It was essentially just a long leather or cloth strap with a pouch in which to place a stone. It would be swung around the head with increasing speed, and at just the right moment one of the ends would be released, freeing the stone to fly to its intended target. But if someone were to permanently attach the stone to its pouch, the result would be that the stone would come back and whack the hurler on the head. Even so, the fool will abuse any privilege and power he's given, whether it be in the form of money or authority. Do you see any of that in your own life?

Second, the fool only knows one language, the language of self-centered pain. **“A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools”** (v. 3). This is speaking to the area of his motivation. What is missing

from his heart are the higher motives of love for God and others, integrity and duty. Instead, he is like senseless animals who only respond to brute force. The fool is self-centered in his motivations. The only way to get him to do something is to appeal to his self-interest. “What’s in it for me?” is the question that is often on his lips. Several years ago, I remember a cartoon where a boss walks up to one of his loafing employees and asks him, “Why aren’t you working?” The loafer replies, “I didn’t see you coming.” The motivation of self-interest alone will lead the fool to action.

Third, his words are empty. **“Like a lame man’s legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools”** (v. 7). A lame man has legs, but cannot use them for the very helpful purpose of walking or standing. In the same way, a fool has the capacity to speak forth the most noble words, but such words carry no weight and have no effect upon his hearers. He is easily ignored even on the rare occasions when he gets it right with his words, because his hearers consider the source and find it wanting.

Fourth, his legacy is that of harm and destruction. Though fools rarely have biographies written of their lives, if such a thing were to be attempted the biographer would find his subject with a long trail of harm behind him. He would see that time when an important man sent the fool as an emissary to negotiate his position on a sensitive matter. It was disastrous. **“Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence”** (v. 6). Much of the damage he did was unintended. He has been like a drunk man waving a thornbush in a crowd of people (v. 9). As he stumbles around waving the bush with his arm, it strikes many people and brings harm to them, though he never intended that it do so. He has been especially harmful to everyone who has depended upon him as an employee. **“Like an archer who wounds everyone is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard”** (v. 10).

His final characteristic is the one more fatal than the others. He does not learn from his mistakes. In a graphic image, we are told **“Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly”** (v. 11). The ability of the stomach to retch and give up what has already gone down is very useful for the health of the body. It is the stomach’s way of saying, “You have made a mistake in eating this; it should never have been ingested.” We are familiar with the picture presented in verse 11. A dog walks up to a pile of vomit that has just come from its own mouth. He looks at it, sniffs it, licks it, and then begins eating it. How repulsive! But we are doing something just as repulsive when we return to something that has already been rejected, a mistake that we have already made. When we fail to learn from our mistakes, we are eating again what has already been rejected.

It is this last feature of the fool that separates the garden variety fool from the hardened fool. The truth is that there is more than a little of the fool in all of us. The hardened fool is the one who doesn’t see his foolishness, with the

result that he never learns from his mistakes. He is too wise in his own eyes to admit any mistake. The truly wise make mistakes, but they make new mistakes instead of making the old ones over and over again.

Do you see any of the fool within yourself? Did any of these five characteristics strike home in your heart? If not, then you are self-deceived and the one for whom there is less hope than for a fool (v. 12). That brings us to our memory verse for the week. I hope you're feeling by now your need of outside help, whether you are the garden-variety fool or the hardened fool who is too wise in his own eyes even to perceive his own foolishness. Our memory verse is a good prayer for fools like me. **“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”** (Psalm 139:23-24).

II. A Common Symptom for the Self-Deceived – Laziness

Our author is not done yet with this topic of the self-deceived who are too wise in their own eyes to see their own foolishness. He introduces us again to a character who has appeared in the book of Proverbs previous to this—the sluggard. We read here that the sluggard's main problem is the one we have been talking about. **“The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly”** (v. 16).

Verse 13 describes what must have seemed to the sluggard a valid excuse for staying home one day instead of going to work. **“There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!”** Can't you hear his words of superiority as he offers up this excuse? “I can't believe all these foolish people I see out today. Didn't they hear those reports of the sighting of a lion nearby? Well, I am no one's fool. You won't catch me going out on a dangerous day like today. I'm much too smart for that.” Of course, everyone except the sluggard can see straight through his words. He's not wise and cautious, just lazy and offering a lame excuse. But in order for his excuse to be effective, he must find a reason for others venturing out on a day like this. He finds it in his greater wisdom, at least a wisdom that is greater in his own eyes.

What are some modern versions of “There's a lion in the streets”? How about, “Can you believe all these people who are reading the entire book that was assigned in English Class? Haven't they ever heard of SparkNotes?” Can you hear the claim to wisdom as a cover for laziness? Here's another, and one that I've used before. “I am much more creative when I wait until the last minute.” I am boasting in my creativity under pressure to excuse the laziness of not properly pacing myself in a big project.

Note the result of this self-deception and laziness. The sluggard begins to exhibit addictive behavior, becoming firmly entrenched in seeking his own

comfort. He is more than fond of his bed; he is hinged to it. He is completely addicted to his own comfort so that he can't get out of bed. He simply turns on his bed, but never leaves it. And like addictive behavior, it never stays the same but always escalates. Note the escalation described in verse 15. **“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.”** I picture someone who finally gets enough strength to prepare himself a bowl of oatmeal. But he has worn himself out in the effort and now can't muster enough strength to transport the food from the bowl to his mouth. This isn't just a comic portrayal of a really lazy person. Like all sin, his is leading to disintegration at even the most basic level of what it means to be a human, that of eating food.

III. The Final Answer for the Self-Deceived – Perfect Wisdom

The sin of self-deception is both the most difficult and the easiest of sins to deal with, all at the same time. As we've already pointed out, it is difficult to deal with because by definition we don't see it. But within that truth lies the key for dealing with it. If we can accept the truth that we don't have it within us to resist this sin of self-deception, then the only answer lies outside of us. The one who is wise in his own eyes will spurn the wisdom that comes from God, but the one who has come to distrust his own wisdom will be open to receive it from God.

Verse 16 speaks of **“seven men who can answer sensibly.”** In the Bible, the number seven refers to completeness and perfection. There is one who is the perfect expression of God's wisdom, and his name is Jesus. The sluggard has made his decision between his own wisdom and perfect wisdom, and he chooses his own. Which will you choose? It is said of Jesus in Colossians 2:3 that in him **“are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”** Have you ever wondered why it says that the treasures of wisdom are *hidden* in Christ? Treasures normally are hidden, aren't they? When it says they are hidden in Christ, I think it just means that this is where we are to look for wisdom. Wisdom is found in a person. Don't look for it within yourself. Look for it in Jesus, because that's where it can be found. So listen to Jesus in all that he says. Trust him instead of trusting yourself.

CONCLUSION:

Let's close by returning to our memory verse and making this our prayer. Ask God to turn his searchlight upon your heart and see within you. He can see what is found there, including all the grievous ways that have been hidden to you because of the self-deception to which we are all prone. Jesus sees it, and he still leads you in the way everlasting. He forgives us and leads us into a life of seeing and confessing our sin and turning in faith to him.