

**February 27, 2005**  
**Sunday of the Prodigal Son**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

We believers go to Holy Scripture, do we not, for clear instruction about how we are to live? If the Bible is anything, it is unambiguous about our duties, right?

Armed with this understanding, then, let us say we pick up our copy of Holy Scripture one day and open it at random. Cutting the Sacred Text roughly in the middle, our eyes chance to fall on Proverbs 26:4-"Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him."

Well, this instruction is surely clear enough. Therefore, resolved not be like the fool according to his folly, we determine, on the spot, to give all fools that old fare-ye-well toss of the head as we pass them and march our merry way along the path of wisdom.

At this point, however, it may occur to us to wonder if the Book of Proverbs has anything else to say about the path of wisdom besides that unambiguous injunction not to answer the fool according to his folly. So we read on to the next verse, which thus instructs us: "Answer the fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (26:5). We may be forgiven, I think, if our initial response to this juxtaposition of conflicting instructions is something like "Hmm."

Both verses are divinely inspired, after all, alike suited for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. All of this is true, but the fact remains that these two verses, juxtaposed by the Holy Spirit Himself, leave the mind with two contrary courses of action, either of which is, it would seem, compatible with sound, prudent, godly behavior.

That is to say, if we are to take both verses with equal seriousness, we must conclude that there are times when a fool is *\*not\** to be answered according to his folly, and there are other times when he *\*is\** to be answered according to his folly, and the responsibility for discerning among these sundry occasions is placed on the conscience of the person who takes God's Word seriously. This is one of those instances in Holy Scripture when the believing mind is offered two godly options and expected to discriminate, prudently, between them.

Much of Holy Scripture--perhaps most of Holy Scripture--contains apodictic pronouncements that leave precious little to our personal discernment. It is exceedingly rare, for example, that the Bible says, "You know, there are two sides to this question." The Thou-shalt-nots of the Pentateuch comes to mind in this respect, as well as the Prophets. I don't think it was often that Elijah commented, "Since the best authorities are divided on this subject, we do well to take the broad view," or that John the Baptist remarked, "But, on the other hand . . ." Usually the instruction of the Bible cuts along the clear lines of "I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life."

The easier responsibilities of the moral life, I submit, are those requiring mainly the three moral virtues necessary for simple obedience--namely, justice, fortitude, and self-control. The truly difficult part of the virtuous life lies, rather, in those situations that require, in addition to the virtues just mentioned, the exercise of prudence. These are the sundry moral decisions governed by more than an apodictic precept.

Such are the occasions often addressed in the Bible's wisdom books. Significantly, it is this literature that more closely considers situations open to more than one serious moral choice, and this is the reason why prudence is mentioned more frequently in the wisdom books than elsewhere. Indeed, *'arum*, the Hebrew adjective most often translated as "prudent," is found only once outside of Job and Proverbs.

Now among those situations not entirely governed by apodictic precept we must surely include the one created by the fool who marches around running his mouth. If he is to receive his just deserts, of course, the fool should be soundly beaten. The Bible is plenty clear on this point (Proverbs 10:13; 19:29; 26:3). The question of how best to handle the fool is not settled, however, by determining what the fool deserves, because it is obviously not a wise nor a well considered course to go about doling out to everybody his just deserts. Such a policy leads only to worse disorders.

The matter of what to do with the fool is at once simpler and more complex. We may either act in charity toward the fool ("lest he be wise in his own eyes"), or we may act in the interest of our own inner peace ("lest you also be like him"). Both are, in principle, godly options.

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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