

Should you answer a fool?

Let me address something right off the bat. When I say “fool.” I am not using this word in a condescending manner or as childish name-calling. I think in our culture, when someone calls someone else a fool, it usually is in an unkind way, and nothing good comes of it. However, I am using this term as a direct quote from Scripture. And when we see this term used in the Bible, it is simply a description of an individual’s thought process.



The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about wisdom and foolishness. If you blindly flipped open the Bible and stuck your finger on some verse that happened to be in the first half of 1 Chronicles, you very likely would be hard-pressed to apply whatever verse you touched directly to your current situation. It’s just the opposite with the book of Proverbs. Almost everything applies!

So, what’s with this month’s Question of the Month – Should you answer a fool? Well, I intend to cover two different topics at the same time. One will be the idea of contradictions in the Bible, and the second will deal with how to respond when speaking with an ardent skeptic.

Take a look at Proverbs 26:4-5 and see what strikes you upon reading both verses:

- (4) Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.
- (5) Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

This is clearly an example of a blatant contradiction, right? How could it not be? The first verse says don’t do something; the very next verse says do it! How can this possibly be the Divinely inspired Word of God?

Skeptics love this passage, kind of. However, they only love it because they feel they can use it to point out contradictions in the Bible. They generally are not concerned with its teaching, just that it seems to be conveying two contradictory statements.

In reality, the Bible is full of contradictions. Well, alleged contradictions, that is! As with most other so-called contradictions, a little bit of investigation clears things right up. And while we are clearing things up, we will also be discussing very good principles to keep in mind when conversing with skeptics. Let’s take a look at what is being taught here.

First of all, the book of Proverbs conveys its messages through various literary devices. You’ll see symbolism, allegory, hyperbole, poetry, and parallelism, such as in the two verses we are considering. The parallelism in these two verses addresses two different aspects of responding to those who think foolishly.

Question of the Month

When the writer of Proverbs states that you **should not** answer a fool according to his folly (verse 4), he is simply saying do not stoop to his level in your response. If he (or she) is being very foolish and unreasonable, do not let those qualities characterize your own conversation. It is human nature to react in a way that is similar to what the other person exhibits. We, however, need to resist and respond in a loving but firm fashion. When we give in, or do what is natural, even if we might be right about our viewpoint, the other person can always fault us for being juvenile or disrespectful, and that's not good. If the skeptic's approach is not effective or acceptable, why would we think it will work for us?

Conversely, when the writer states that you **should** answer a fool according to his folly (verse 5), he is saying that it can be fairly effective to momentarily mirror the skeptic's foolishness to help them see how irrational they are being. You have to do this very respectfully and not in a condescending manner. A child, while losing an argument, might suddenly insert, "Oh yeah! Well, my dad can beat up your dad!" What does that have to do with anything? It doesn't. The other child might respond by saying, "Oh yeah? Well, my grandpa can beat up your dad!" That's a very silly response. Just as silly as the first child's response, but maybe it will help them see the folly of their reasoning.

One note of caution. Since we are largely dealing with spiritual matters when talking to a skeptic, we need to understand that the Bible says the skeptic is spiritually blind (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) and that the preaching of the cross is foolishness to them (1 Corinthians 1:18). Therefore, it's not just a matter of giving a skeptic a solid argument and having them say, "Wow, I never thought of that before! You're making a very good point. I really need to change my worldview. Tell me more!"

When was the last time you were in the middle of a heated argument with your spouse or someone else close to you, and you responded that way? Probably never. Why? Mostly because of pride! If we as Christians struggle with being humble enough to admit when we're wrong, how much harder do you think it is for the skeptic? That's where patience and kindness come into play. We need to be very patient with the skeptic, especially when we don't understand why they don't "get it." Kindness is huge when it comes to letting them know we are not ultimately out to win an argument or tell them how bad of a person they are; we care enough about them that we want them to know the truth and what the only real hope is in life – Jesus Christ.

So, answer and don't answer! The Holy Spirit will let you know which approach to use when you prayerfully reach out to those around you who are struggling with life, which is just about everyone!

If you have any questions about this or any other issue, please don't hesitate to [contact us!](#)