

The Spotters' Guide to the... Scoffers

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 September 2026

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0:00] Now we're going to turn to our Bibles and read together in the Old Testament in the books of! What we call the wisdom books, the book of Proverbs. We're going to read in a couple of places there.

If you don't have a Bible, we have visitors' Bibles at the side, red Bibles, front and the back. Do go and get yourself one so that you can read and see where we're reading from.

Paul Brennan is going to be opening up some of this theme this evening, the theme of a common theme in the book of Proverbs about the scoffer. If you were here this morning, we had a great example of scoffing at God's Word. Phil Copeland was preaching from 2 Kings 6.

And here we're on the same theme this evening, accidentally for us, but obviously not for God. And we're going to read together in two places, Proverbs chapter 1, first of all at verse 20, and then a few verses from Proverbs chapter 19. So Proverbs chapter 1 then at verse 20.

Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the market she raises her voice. At the head of our noisy street she cries out. At the entrance of the city gates she speaks.

[1:20] How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will you scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my Spirit to you.

I will make my words known to you. Because I've called you and you refuse to listen. I've stretched out my hand and no one has heeded. Because you've ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof. I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when terror strikes you.

When terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me. But I will not answer. They'll seek me diligently.

But they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord.

God would have none of my counsel and despised my reproof. Therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their way and have the fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away.

And the complacency of fools destroys them. But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster.

[3:09] Now turn over to chapter 19. And we read from verse 25, this little section to the end of the chapter. And you'll see the same theme. Strike a scoffer and the simple will learn prudence.

Reprove a man of understanding and he will gain knowledge. He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach.

Cease to hear instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge. A worthless witness mocks at justice.

And the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity. Condemnation is ready for scoffers. And beating for the backs of fools.

Amen. Amen. Well, may God bless to us his word and help us to learn true wisdom from him and from his word.

[4:23] Well, good evening, folks. Please have the book of Proverbs open in front of you. Have chapter one open. That'd be helpful. And we're going to consider tonight the topic of the scoffer, the mocker.

Now, to live well and wisely in God's word requires relational wisdom. We need relational discernment.

As we thought about last week, there is much in Proverbs about what sort of person to be. But there's also a lot in Proverbs about how to read other people.

Proverbs is teaching you how to understand others and, crucially, how to act in response. Proverbs will teach you to be a good reader of other people. Now, the subject tonight is a more serious case than last week.

Proverbs describes different categories of fool. At one end of the spectrum, we have the simple. We saw that last time. The simple person is fundamentally vulnerable.

[5 : 28] They are undisciplined. They're rather weak rather than being deliberately wicked. They lack discernment, easily led into temptation. They're not so much bad as irresponsible.

That's at one end of the spectrum. The other end is our topic tonight, the scoffer. To be simple, that's a dangerous position to be in.

But they don't generally pose a danger to other people. However, the scoffer really does. The scoffer is in a dangerous position themselves and they are a great danger to others. And they're especially dangerous to the simple, to the naive, the gullible.

Seeing the scoffer for who he really is and acting accordingly really is crucial to wise living, says Proverbs. Tonight's sermon is a bit of a warning.

It's like a cold bucket of water thrown over your head. And the thing is that Proverbs is not slow to issue a warning. It's not slow to issue a necessary negative.

[6 : 39] It's one of the very first things the writer does in the whole book. Just cast your eye over chapter 1. We have a general introduction there, verses 1 to 6. The summary you get there in verse 7.

Look at verse 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools, despise, wisdom and instruction. So far, so good. But almost immediately, the writer begins to warn about certain groups of people.

People who are to be avoided. Look at verse 10. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

Look on to verse 15. My son, do not walk in the way with them. Hold back your foot from their paths. There are some people you just need to stay away from.

Do not go with them. There are people to be avoided. So what is the writer's approach here? What is the author of Proverbs? What's his approach to teaching? Well, a big part of it is identifying who to avoid.

[7 : 46] And chief among them is the scoffer, the mocker, the scorner. We would do well to listen carefully to Proverbs tonight in relation to the scoffer for two reasons.

Number one, a scoffer is extremely dangerous. Especially within the household of God, within the church. A scoffer can destroy a church.

They really are a danger. Second reason why we need to listen carefully to the book of Proverbs about the scoffer is because often the scoffer looks very impressive.

They can look good. They sound really good. They can be somewhat magnetic and draw others in. And we therefore need the wisdom that only the Lord can provide so that we can rightly discern what sort of person we're dealing with.

Are we in fact dealing with a scoffer? We need God's wisdom to help us. So three basic points tonight. How to spot the scoffer.

[8 : 51] How to respond. And what if you are a scoffer? How do you respond? So number one, how to spot. How do you identify a scoffer? Let me read you some Proverbs.

Don't turn there. I'll read them to you. I'll give you the chapter references, but don't turn. Chapter 13, a wise son hears his father's instructions, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

Chapter 15, a scoffer does not like to be reproved. He will not go to the wise. Chapter 19, which we read earlier, strike a scoffer and the simple will learn prudence.

Reprove a man of understanding, he will gain knowledge. Chapter 21, when a scoffer is punished, the simple become wise. When a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge.

Again, chapter 21, scoffer is the name of the arrogant, the haughty man who acts with arrogant pride.

[9 : 56] Chapter 22, drive out a scoffer and strife will go out and quarreling and abuse will cease. Chapter 24, the devising of folly is sin and the scoffer is an abomination to mankind.

Chapter 29, scoffers set the city aflame, but the wise turn away wrath. Let me draw that together. Four traits of a scoffer. Number one, they have a very high view of themselves. They have a very high view of themselves. The scoffer, says chapter 21, scoffer is the name of the arrogant.

Haughty man, he acts with arrogant pride. The scoffer is arrogant. They're prideful. They place a very high value on the rightness of their own opinions.

Tim Keller describes them like this. He says, Now, it's not wrong, is it, to have strong opinions? [11:21] But it's the attitude underlying those opinions that's the issue, isn't it? It's the posture behind the decisions, the words that's the issue.

If someone is just never prepared to concede that they might possibly be wrong, if somebody is never able to hear somebody else's point of view and have their mind changed, then it might be possible you're dealing with a scoffer.

If they can never admit that anyone else could possibly be right, if they and they alone always land on the right opinion, then you might have a scoffer on your hands.

That's the first aspect. They have a very high opinion of themselves. Number two, the very low view of those in authority. They've got a very low view of those in authority.

Listen to chapter 13. A wise son hears his father's instructions, but a scoffer does not listen to a rebuke.

[12:29] Because the scoffer has such a high view of themselves, such an inflated view, the rightness of their own judgments, they really do think they know better. And so they harbor a very low view of those who are in authority.

They are incapable of hearing correction. The scoffer does not listen to rebuke, says Proverbs. They will always have an answer. There will always be a justification for their behavior.

The last thing they will do is concede that they are in the wrong. At any point, it's always somebody else's fault. If they're the one whose behavior has really hurt other folk, caused damage, and they get rebuked for it, before you finish your sentence, they will be painted themselves as the victim, and you're the one doing me damage.

They will refuse to be held accountable. They will not accept right authority. A scoffer does not listen to a rebuke. A very high view of themselves, a very low opinion of those in authority.

Thirdly, a wide circle of influence. Let me pick up one of the comments that Keller makes. He said that the scoffer's talent for cutting insults and invective looks like intellectual sophistication.

[13:51] If you rub shoulders with a scoffer, a person who's always got a sort of a cutting word, they can always find fault.

Whatever sermon was preached, they find the precise point of error. They've always got a snarky comment, a put down. Any decisions that's reached, they will find fault almost immediately.

They will seem very insightful. They will seem very intelligent. And that can come across as discernment. To talk with somebody like that who can quickly spot something at issue, that can be quite impressive, can't it?

You can sort of think, oh, they know what they're talking about. They must be impressive.

Especially with this bit of charm and humor thrown in. It can be quite magnetic. You can be quite drawn to people like that.

And so the scoffer can develop a bit of a following. And their circle of influence can surprise you.

They will draw well-meaning folk in, folk who are the best of intentions, think well of everyone.

[14:54] They will just be a bit naive. They can't see the reality of the scoffer's pride and arrogance. And this is one of the reasons why scoffers are just so dangerous.

And it's why the solution to dealing with them is just so radical, as we'll see. But it's a circle of influence that is inherently unstable.

It's prone to collapse in the end. According to Proverbs, what happens to the scoffer over time, to the man or woman that always has to be right, who derides rather than engage with opposing views, what happens?

Well, Proverbs says that the first result, it ends up in loneliness. Proverbs 9, If you scoff, you alone will bear it.

Scoffers impress the impressionable if they're allowed to hold forth. But as time goes by, the scoffer not only destroys relationships, but is listened to less and less by the public.

[16:07] The scoffer is, chapter 24, an abomination to mankind. They'll end up alone. People will see them for who they really are in the end.

But for a time, they will have influence. They're impressive. So a high view of themselves, a low view of those in authority, a wide circle of influence, and lastly, a source of deep division.

Chapter 22, drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out. Quarreling and abuse will cease. Remember that the arena in which Proverbs is mainly dealing with is the people of God.

This is wisdom for God's people. And these observations, they are generally true in life as well, aren't they? But they have a particular use within the professing church.

But we can think more widely, can't we, as we think about a scoffer, someone like that who I've just described, we can think about them perhaps with their own families or our workplaces. But chiefly, what we're concerned with here is the family of God, the church.

[17 : 30] Now sometimes, the scoffer, they may have valid points, but because of their dogmatic, the result is not peace, but division.

That's not to say that you don't ask questions or raise concerns, of course not. If you have concerns, you just raise it with the church leadership. More than happy to chat things through.

That's why we're part of a presbytery.

We can bring our concerns. We're accountable to others. That's important. There are right and proper ways to deal with issues that arise. But the scoffer won't do that, you see.

The scoffer, they'll whisper their conspiracies to anyone who'll hear them. They'll sow division. And this is because scoffers don't know how to affirm and live in harmony with people who don't agree with them and everything.

They're the ones who are right. They can't handle people not being on side with them. Everything becomes a fight in the end. Unless they get their way, well, they kick out, they spread their anger.

[18 : 46] And if you're like me, then our itching ears love a bit of a scandal, don't they? We love hearing a bit of intrigue, a bit of drama.

And talk like this from a scoffer can really spread fast, can cause real damage. People who are happily serving the Lord, working away, they hear the grumblings of a scoffer and they start to doubt themselves.

Discontentedness can spread very quickly. And before you know it, division erupts. The problem, as Derek Kidner says, the mischief he does is not the random mischief of an ordinary fool, but it's the deeper damage of a debunker.

There is an agenda. They are there to sow division. It's pretty sobering, isn't it? A high view of themselves, a low view of those in authority, a wide circle of influence, and a source of deep division.

What do we do? How might we respond? Well, Prabhupada doesn't pull its punches, does it, when it comes to dealing with a scoffer? Now again, we're particularly thinking about the family of faith here, but this applies more widely, doesn't it, to other areas of life.

[20 : 13] What does Proverbs say in terms of how to handle a scoffer? Well, chapter 19, verse 25, strike a scoffer, and the simple will learn prudence.

Reprove a man of understanding, and he will gain knowledge. Chapter 21, verse 11, when a scoffer is punished, the simple become wise.

when a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge. And chapter 22, 10, drive out the scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease.

A scoffer needs to be dealt with decisively, says Proverbs, publicly, removed sometimes. Proverbs is pretty straight down the line when it comes to dealing with a scoffer, and it makes us feel uncomfortable, doesn't it?

Talk of striking a scoffer. When a scoffer is punished, drive them out. Why such radical action? Why is it taking such a strong line when it comes to the scoffer?

[21 : 26] Well, two reasons. One, it's to teach and protect the simple. What happens when a scoffer is punished?

Well, the simple, it says, become wise. Because scoffers are especially influential, it seems, with the simple, they need to be dealt with in a very clear manner. And the thing is that the simple often look up to them.

they wait for the scoffer to give their decisive opinion on the latest sermon or the latest decision.

And scoffers do it not by carefully considered arguments and reasoned conversations.

No, a scoffer's toolbox is a sigh, a snarky comment, an arched eyebrow, a little WhatsApp message with a few emojis.

That communicates enough. Seeds of division scattered over fertile soil. What do the simple need? That sort of person removed.

[22:37] They need to hear the call of the wise, don't they? Not the scoffing of the scoffer. And sometimes the only way that the simple can come to their senses is as if the scoffer is punished and dealt with.

And so the action commended in Proverbs is not so much for the benefit of the scoffer, is it? No, no, it's for the benefit of everybody else. Especially for the simple.

And the realistic assessment of Proverbs is that often a true scoffer, they're too far gone. They are beyond help often.

And that's a very sober warning. Listen to Proverbs 9 which warns us what to expect when we try to correct such people. Proverbs 9, verse 7, whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse.

Whoever reproves a wicked man incurs injury, do not reprove a scoffer or they will hate you.

Reprove a wise man and he will love you.

[23:47] According to this, the scoffer, the scoffer is unteachable because they reject both the teacher and the teaching. Instead of welcoming instruction as to the wise and righteous, the scoffer arrogantly ridicules the teacher, rejects it, well, because they are the authority, they know better, don't they?

And that is so very difficult. If you find yourself dealing with a scoffer, what are you going to get? Not thanks, not love, hatred.

How dare you? How dare you tell me I'm wrong? They're too hardened to listen, too wrapped up in their own opinions to receive correction.

And often they're past the point of return. But everybody else around isn't. And unless the scoffer's dealt with robustly, then others might get dragged in and dragged down.

When a scoffer's punished, what happens? The simple become wise. So, when a scoffer is being dealt with in robust terms, we're to learn the lesson, aren't we?

[25:09] We're to become wise. That's the intention, that's the whole emphasis here in Proverbs. That's the first aspect, is to teach and protect the simple.

Second reason, why Proverbs takes such a hard line, well, it's to bring an end to division. Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out.

Quarrelling and abuse will cease. the worst thing you can do with a scoffer is turn a blind eye and hope for the best. Some people will fail to see what's obvious to others, and especially the naive or the simple, they'll be sucked in by a scoffer.

And actually, the scoffer depends on the naivety of others in order to flourish. The naive give them oxygen. a trail of pain follows when no one stands up to a scoffer.

The scoffing parent or relative who the rest of the family protects with secrets and excuses. The scoffing employee who management protects because, well, they've got good sales numbers.

[26:18] Or maybe they're fearful of the legal action that will follow if they take steps required to get rid of them. Where there is conflict and division bubbling up in a congregation, it's worth doing the hard work, asking the hard questions, and perhaps you'll find the source of that strife, at the root of it, is a scoffer.

If you want to bring an end to that division, that strife, well, the scoffer's got to be removed. And that is a hard thing to do. Careful thought. To be taken before such a step.

But when the conclusion is reached that there is a mocker, a scoffer, who refuses to repent of their ways, then they must be removed. And some will misunderstand, but the majority will breathe a bit of a sigh of relief.

They'll be glad to see the back of the scoffer. Peace and harmony will have been restored. You maybe know that experience yourself. Think of a workplace situation, perhaps, or a sports team. There's one guy, very able, very articulate, they're good at their job, but they are supremely arrogant.

Every decision made by the boss is the wrong one. Every initiative is misguided. He's a constant source of negativity and other team members get dragged down. You're longing for them to find a new job or be promoted outwards.

[27:47] And when it happens, relief. Suddenly the team starts to function well. Everyone's happy again. You know what it's like when you've had that situation. Drive out a scoffer and strife will go out.

Now, that's not an easy thing for church leadership to deal with, is it? If there's a scoffer in the midst. It's a very hard thing to deal with. Now, I've known ministers who've had to take that action,

maybe once or twice in their entire ministries, ministry stretching over 40 years.

They've had one instance like this. So this isn't a weekly thing. This is very unusual. But the time may come where it's necessary, where that step needs to be taken.

It requires courage, doesn't it? But it's part of being under shepherds of Christ's flock. All those in church leadership will have to give an account one day to the great shepherd himself.

Did you protect my flock, he will ask, from scoffers? So there's a responsibility for leaders here, but certainly there's a responsibility for all of us.

[29:10] Don't feed the scoffer. Don't become their audience. Don't forward the message. Don't join the conversation. Don't reward destructive criticism for, with your attention.

So it's sobering, isn't it, Proverbs response, its answer to dealing with a scoffer. But it's necessary. But what if it's, what if it's you? There'll be some here tonight who, by nature, have a tender conscience.

they'll be worried. Is that me? Am I a scoffer? I've disagreed with something my small group leader said, or I disagree with that decision. I've spoken to other people about that, and you worry, is Proverbs talking about me?

Well, probably not. If you're worrying about it, then by definition you're not a scoffer. Because what's a scoffer's response to rebuke? Hmm, doesn't apply to me.

[30:17] Couldn't possibly. No, no, the scoffer, by definition, has a very high regard for themselves, their own opinions. Their consciences are not tender. They hear the warning, they don't think it applies to them.

So if you're worrying, if you're anxious, am I a scoffer, then I think the fact you're worrying is proof you're not. The scoffer won't hear it unless, unless the Lord is at work in their hearts.

The Lord is breaking down their resistance, opening their eyes, showing them reality. Proverbs, as well as helping us to observe others who might be scoffers, it does pull up a mirror, doesn't it, and show us ourselves, examining our own hearts.

And each of us, if we're honest, we will have scoffing tendencies lurking not too far below the surface. and by nature, left to ourselves, each of us is a scoffer, without the revelation of God, without the work of his spirit in our lives, all of us have a very high regard of ourselves, don't we? All of us reject authority. All of us, given enough opportunity, cause hurt and division to those around us. In a moment, we're going to sing a hymn, How Deep the Father's Love for Us.

[31:50] Here's the second verse. Behold, a man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders, ashamed.

I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life.

I know that it's finished. If you're not yet a Christian, then you do need to repent of your scoffing ways, not only in relation to other people, but supremely in relation to the Lord.

You see, he made us. He cares for us. We were made to know him and to worship him, to love him. And by nature, we don't do that. And if we don't worship the Lord, then ultimately we ask offers, thinking that we know best, putting ourselves at the center and the Lord on the outskirts.

[32:58] In the end, there are only two options when it comes to how we relate to Jesus, to the Lord. We either proudly mock or we humbly worship.

Those are the two ways. And there's no more vivid example of those two responses than the crucifixion of Jesus himself. Let me read from the end of Luke 23.

Two others who are criminals were led away to be put to death with Jesus. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

One of the criminals who was hanged, railed at him saying, are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him saying, do you not fear God since you are under the same sense of condemnation?

And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said to Jesus, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

[34:11] And Jesus said to him, truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. paradise. Is there any hope for those who once arrogantly scoffed at the Lord and his son?

Yes. Absolutely there's hope. But it requires humility to receive it, doesn't it? It means recognizing who Jesus really is and who we really are.

It means recognizing his authority, his kingship, laying aside our own, refusing to humble ourselves before Jesus, refusing to bow before him.

That is the ultimate act of scoffing, isn't it? In the end, Jesus will drive out every scoffer for all eternity. But those who humble themselves, well, they'll be welcomed into paradise.

So if you haven't yet humbled yourself before Jesus, then you must cry out to him for mercy. His dying breath has brought you life.

[35 : 23] Repent of your scoffing. And if you're a professing Christian here, then heed the warning of Proverbs.

Don't be a scoffer. I've seen professing Christians in other places displaying scoffing behavior and it's done huge damage.

Huge damage to other Christians, to the church, to the witness of Christ. It does massive damage. And their response to correction only underlines their scoffing behavior.

fear. Or perhaps you realize that to your shame, you have scoffed. You have mocked.

Well, if that's you, then be thankful that the Lord has brought that conviction into your own hearts because most scoffers won't come to that realization. Most scoffers are too proud. So if you recognize what you've done and you confess it, repent.

[36 : 38] We do find forgiveness in the Lord. It's not too late. But repent. To remain a scorning scoffer is a dangerous place to be.

Proverbs says, send them away. And if they refuse to repent, the Lord Jesus will send them away in the end for all eternity. Proverbs 3.

Towards the scornors, he is scornful. But to the humble, he gives favor. The Apostle Peter says the same thing.

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another. For God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. The proud, arrogant person, the scoffer, will refuse to get on their knees. They will not crawl into the kingdom. And that's the only way in. The bar isn't too high. It's too low for some. And the humble, they will get on their knees gladly.

[37 : 52] Repent. Seek forgiveness. That's the only way, isn't it? The scoffer can't do that. The scoffer won't. So beware, the scoffer says Proverbs.

A wise son hears his father's instruction. But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, humble us in response to your word.

Lord, your stark warnings are a gracious warning, which are there to move us towards you.

Because you are a God rich in mercy, steadfast love. And you delight to call people to yourself for all eternity. So Lord, forgive us for our scoffing ways.

[39 : 12] And help us to humble ourselves before you. Help us to heed the wisdom of your word tonight. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.