

The Lips of a Fool Consume Him
Ecclesiastes 10
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Read Ecclesiastes 10

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Introduction

Do you all know the name William Bennett? He was a big name in DC politics in the 1980’s, the Secretary of Education and then Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. In the midst of all those positions, he wrote a book called *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*. I remember that being a big deal in the 90’s, kind of a book to rally around for conservatives who were very upset about the Clinton administration. It was a big seller and William Bennett was getting a lot of attention, until he got a little too much attention and it came out that he was a high-stakes gambler in Vegas. Not something that you would expect from someone who just literally wrote the book on virtues. It was enough to derail his reputation and sink his book sales. He tried to do damage control and explain that he never put his family in jeopardy, that he never gambled more than he could afford, but the damage had been done.¹

This morning our passage in Ecclesiastes tells us that *“A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.”* I think for the most part William Bennett was an intelligent and accomplished man. But, unfortunately, all of his wisdom and honor was called into question by a little folly. There’s an old saying, *“When I do good, no one remembers; when I do bad, no one forgets.”* It doesn’t seem very fair, but it’s reality. And Solomon, the author of this marvelous book that we’re studying, wants us to do nothing so much as to face reality head on, jagged edges, difficult questions, and exasperating contradictions included. As we think about living our lives with wisdom and avoiding foolishness, we need to remember that wisdom and folly are not necessarily about your IQ or your level of knowledge. Biblical wisdom is the right application of knowledge and morality, while folly is a failure to do the right thing with knowledge. We had a whole sermon back in September on how pursuing knowledge and wisdom and making it an idol in your life was one of the dead-ends in Solomon’s search for meaning. Today is kind of a Part 2 of that study, reminding us that wisdom, while not the “be all, end all” is much preferable to folly, and will not only enhance your life here and now, but will have ramifications for eternity.

The first seven verses in our passage shed some light on this, telling us that

I. A Fool Loses His Way in Life (vv. 1-7)

¹ Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. ² A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. ³ Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool. ⁴ If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest. ⁵ There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: ⁶ folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. ⁷ I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Bennett

When we first moved into our house, it was summer and there were lots of contractors and workers coming in and out. So we had a lot of flies, constantly swatting them. The worst was if you poured yourself a drink and then you found one in there, right? In that situation, how many of us will just pick the fly out and then finish drinking? No, we'll throw the whole thing down the sink, wash the cup, and if we're still thirsty, we'll start over with a new cup and pour more. Solomon says the same thing happens in your life when you mix in a little folly: it can spoil everything else. William Bennett found out with his gambling. You could have a great life and be prospering in every way, but one night you have a little too much to drink, grab your car keys, and you've wrecked your life with a DUI or an accident.

Verse 2, "*a wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left,*" has nothing to do with politics, or with being right-handed or left-handed. The Biblical writers used the right side as the correct side, the right arm was the arm of power, the seat to the right was the seat of honor in the ancient world. It's just a fluke in English that right and right are the same word. But the main idea is that wisdom and foolishness send you in opposite directions. The heart in Ecclesiastes is not so much the emotions as it is the intellect, so a wise man's sense guides him in the correct path, while the fool pursues vanity and immorality. It seems that the rest of the verse (3-7) describe foolishness at every level, some for the lowborn and some for the aristocracy. The last chapter had talked about how the fastest runner doesn't always win the race, the strongest army doesn't always win a battle, and several other examples like those. Verses 5-7 come to a similar contradiction: a foolish, lowborn man sits on a horse, in an exalted place, while the rich prince walks and is treated as lowly. Sometimes the whole world seems upside-down and committed to the way of foolishness. But the wise and godly can stand out in a world that has lost its mind, that lives by folly.

As we move on to the next section, we are warned that foolishness can be dangerous, that we can hurt ourselves, just as

II. A Fool Digs His Own Grave (vv. 8-15)

⁸ He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. ⁹ He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. ¹⁰ If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed. ¹¹ If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer. ¹² The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. ¹³ The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. ¹⁴ A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him? ¹⁵ The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.

Many of our work environments these days are not nearly as dangerous as the four accidents that are described in verses 8-9. I have a workman's comp policy if I were to get hurt on the job, but seriously, what's the worst that can happen to me on most days? I get carpal tunnel from typing, weaken my eyesight from all the screen time, or drop a book on my foot? Just this week, Kath and I got a piece of furniture from a guy who has this amazing woodshop set up behind his house; this massive space with tools and materials and unfinished projects all over the place. And he was telling us how to do some things, telling us to be careful and wear goggles; meanwhile, he's cutting this huge piece of wood on this really sharp saw with no goggles, no gloves; he's been doing it so long, apparently he doesn't need to take precautions.

But Solomon lists all these ways you could hurt yourself doing manual labor, being hurt by stones, logs or snakes. Those things could happen to anyone, but the implication seems to be that a foolish

person is more likely to fall prey to these dangerous situations. In contrast, verses 10 and 11 say that the wise person plans ahead – they sharpen their blades, they're ready to do their work in a timely manner. Working smarter not necessarily harder, will help you avoid those accidents. The message is: Don't be the fool that digs his own grave, even by accident; use wisdom to carefully consider your ways (which was Pastor Mike's theme in last week's sermon).

Verses 12-15 are almost comical: a fool's lips consume him, just picture someone's mouth turning on them and eating them; he says that from beginning to end, a fool talks madness and nonsense, no one knows what he's saying and he's wearing himself out. If you know the book of Proverbs well, you know that Solomon filled it with sayings about the wise and the foolish. Here are just a few:

Proverbs 10:14 – *“The wise lay up knowledge, but the mouth of the fool brings ruin near.”*

Proverbs 10:21 – *“The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.”*

Proverbs 12:23 – *“A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.”*

What's the big deal about being careful with our words? Just because you say mean or thoughtless things doesn't mean you're a bad person, does it? Well, it's true that everyone slips up and says things they wish that they hadn't, but the Bible consistently teaches that the content of your speech is a test of your character. Foolish talk flows a foolish heart, and wisdom comes from a heart committed to the Lord. *“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”* is how Jesus phrased it in Matthew 12:34. A way to test yourself in this is the next time you're cut off in traffic, what are the first words that comes out of your mouth? Whatever your heart is filled up with will be your first reaction – whether it's a string of expletives or thanks to God that you didn't get hit.

James 3:5-10 explores how vital it is for Christians to get a grasp on our words, on our tongues:

“So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

Our final four verses advise us that

III. A Fool Hurts Others He Leads (vv. 16-20)

¹⁶ Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! ¹⁷ Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness! ¹⁸ Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. ¹⁹ Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. ²⁰ Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.

Verses 17 and 18 contrast two kingdoms – one is run by a child and sees its princes getting drunk in the morning, the other is run by a noble prince who makes sure that his court eats at the proper time and does not get drunk. Verse 18 reminds us that bad rulers have disastrous consequences: the roof sinking and the house leaking because of laziness and neglect can certainly happen to individuals and their homes, but the context seems to make it a metaphor for a country and the results of poor governing.

We talked a couple weeks ago about making sure that even when you do not agree with your leaders that you respectfully disagree. Here, Solomon's advice is not so much theological as practical: be careful where you are and who you're talking to when you criticize the king. Most countries throughout the history of the world have not had freedom of speech quite like we do in America. At other places and times, you could be arrested and killed for siding with the wrong political figures. Royal families were notorious for wiping out their opponents, as Solomon even had some experience with; you can read in 1 Kings chapter 2 about how he had three of his political opponents executed early in his reign to secure his throne. So here Solomon says to be careful with your thoughts, even your private words because they could be told to the king. Obviously, a bird is not going to listen in on your conversations and fly to the king, but if you've ever heard the expression "a little birdie told me," that's essentially what he's saying here: be careful who you speak ill of the king around, you could suffer if that knowledge gets in the wrong hands.

It's kind of ironic that the logo for Twitter is a bird, and if you think about it, writing something that people take the wrong way on Twitter or any kind of social media can get you "cancelled," can get you fired or blackballed in certain circles.² Maybe we don't have as free a speech as we think in this country – we do officially, but not informally. I've heard that employers search applicants' social media history when they're deciding whether to hire them or not. A youth leader friend of mine said she was constantly telling kids to be careful what they posted online – it is the world wide web, after all. Anything you post on there can be spread and it probably lives forever on some server. Even posting thoughts to what you think is a private group, your words can be screenshot or leaked, taking out of context. Maybe I'm stretching these verses a little, but Solomon's advice is to be very careful about your private opinions and who you share them with, or be willing to live with the consequences.

Conclusion

As we think through this passage as a whole, we must avoid being fools if we want to live in a way that is pleasing to God and that is full of meaning and purpose. Let's go back to James chapter 3 to glean some more insights into this area. Verses 13-18 compares living wisely to living with jealousy and selfish ambition, which is essentially living with folly:

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

Again, the emphasis is that what is in your heart will come out in your life. When our hearts just want to hurt others, we will live foolishly, James says doing "vile practices." But when we receive God's peace and the fruits of the Spirit in our hearts, it works itself out in our lives as we seek peace, mercy, purity, sincerity. Think about that phrase "a harvest of righteousness" – when we let our wisdom and godliness guide our actions, so many wonderful things result. Choose the legacy of your life, the way you want to be known: for disorder and vile practices or for a harvest of righteousness.

Jim Elliott was a young man in the 1940s, hopefully you've heard his story before, I won't repeat it all here. He wanted to be a missionary and reach people for Jesus that no one had ever reached, he

² Some thoughts adapted from Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), p. 190.

ended up losing his life, being killed, in that pursuit. But when he was still a student, he wrote this in his journal: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." I don't want to be a fool and waste my life, so I want to know what that means.

Think about the ways that people set up their lives to achieve meaning and purpose:

-You can chase money, concentrate your life on building wealth only to lose it when the stock market crashes, or you are sued for everything you have, or you're swindled by someone like Bernie Madoff.

-You can live your whole life to be respected by people and it could all be gone in one day by someone's false accusation or someone's criticism of you that goes viral on the internet.

-You could lift weights until you win the Mr. Universe contest or become the healthiest person on the planet, only to be hit by a car and paralyzed.

-You could pour all your life and resources into your children, making sure that they're successful and will carry on after you, but they could turn out rotten or turn on you and want nothing to do with you.

-I recently read a post on FB from a guy who said that his great-grandfather built their ancestral home over a hundred years ago from timber that he cut himself. He has countless memories of that house, loved being there, and his son planned to be the 5th generation to live there. But someone burned it down this past summer.

Name one thing that people strive for that could not be torn down in a day! If we're really honest with ourselves, everything that we try to make our life count for something could totally backfire and make us feel completely meaningless. Ecclesiastes has tried to warn us about chasing the wrong things, about building our lives on things that don't ultimately fulfill us and give us meaning and purpose, but most of the world won't listen to that advice.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." The ultimate step in embracing wisdom over folly is recognizing that eternity and pleasing God are infinitely more important than trying to get all the best stuff here on earth. It's the opposite of "gain the whole world and lose your soul," it's "gain all the things that God promises in eternity by losing your grip on the things of the world that will fade and be lost." It's securing the imperishable, undefiled inheritance kept for us in heaven, as 1 Peter 1 tells us.

Wisdom is submitting our wills, our ways to our Creator and finding His path for us. Wisdom is realizing that without the love of God expressed through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we are lost, both now and for eternity. Jesus, who was the very Word of God to man, the wisdom of God in the flesh, came to earth to reconcile fallen humanity to His heavenly Father. Where we all have gone our own way and have no hope in our dark, foolish ways, Jesus is the shining light of hope for us. His death on the cross pays the price of our sin so that God our Father does not count our sin against us and punish us. When we have no sin on our account because of what Jesus has done for us, we are brought into God's eternal family and we are guaranteed an eternity in heaven.

→ Transition to communion

Benediction - 2 Corinthians 13:11 - *"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."*