

Sermon 63, What, More Fools Still?, Proverbs 17:7-15

Proposition: The disaster of human folly brings terrible evil, but it has culminated in the folly of the Cross.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, some of you might remember the interchange at the beginning of *Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian is departing for the Celestial City and Obstinate and Pliable come out to talk to him.

Obstinate. Come, then, neighbour Pliable, let us turn again, and go home without him; there is a company of these crazy-headed coxcombs, that, when they take a fancy by the end, are wiser in their own eyes than seven men that can render a reason. [Prov. 26:16]

Pliable. Then said Pliable, Don't revile; if what the good Christian says is true, the things he looks after are better than ours: my heart inclines to go with my neighbour.

Obstinate. What! more fools still! Be ruled by me, and go back; who knows whither such a brain-sick fellow will lead you? Go back, go back, and be wise.

Those immortal words, "More fools still," form a very appropriate title for our message this morning. Though Obstinate is the real fool, and Christian is wise for escaping toward the Celestial City, still, Obstinate thinks he is surrounded by fools. And brothers and sisters, maybe not much has changed. As you hear about the sorts of folly our passage profiles, and the consequences they bring on, ask yourself whether we've really advanced all that far. Doesn't folly still surround us? Certainly the reader of Proverbs can well say, "What? More fools still?" Haven't we heard enough about what the fool is like? Solomon says no, we haven't. The main

point which we'll see in our text this morning is that human folly brings terrible evil, but that the apotheosis of folly took place at the cross of Jesus Christ. We'll get there. But first, three types of folly.

I. Three Sorts of Folly, vv. 7-9

A. Verbal, v. 7

The first of these, unsurprisingly, is verbal folly. We have heard a lot about speech in the last 62 sermons, because the mouth is the surest index to the heart. But we see here that "fine," "excellent," or "eloquent" lips are not fitting for a fool. The variant translations indicate the difficulty in understanding what particular nuance of the word is meant. The word's literal meaning is "excess," used sometimes in the sense of "too much" and sometimes in the sense of "excellent" or "preeminent." All the major translations take the "excellent" option and say that eloquence is not fitting for a fool; yet at least one commentator argues strongly that it's the quantity of words that's unfitting for a fool. Brothers and sisters, the bottom line, as we know from the rest of the book, is that the fool in general does not speak in an appropriate way, whether he speaks little or much. Both verbal diarrhea and beautiful eloquence are unfitting for him — perhaps the reason that the verse is ambiguous in the first place.

So, that said, what does verbal folly look like? The strongest example of it is lying lips in a prince. We're so used to this (see "jokes" like "How can you tell whether a politician is lying? His lips are moving") that we expect our political leaders to lie. PolitiFact rates only 20% of Barack Obama's statements as "true." Of Donald Trump's statements, only 4% get that rating. Regardless of how you feel about those ratings, brothers and sisters, I think we can agree that however little lying lips become a prince, they are not exactly rare among our political elites. And do you know what? That's horrible. Those to whom people listen need to do a lot better than making misleading claims the vast majority of the time, whether that's 80% of the time or 96% of the time or some other equally horrific statistic.

What kind of devotion to truth do you have? If you don't know, will you say "I don't know" or will you make something up? If a team of fact-checkers were evaluating your statements, would they say that you tell the truth most of the time, almost all of the time — or less than 20% of the time?

None of us are princes here on earth. Few of us hold elected office of any kind. But we have a king for our Father in Heaven, and our speech must be worthy of Him. Speech that's full of lies is not fitting for you, for me, or for any Christian.

B. Financial, v. 8

Sadly, as we all know, folly is not confined to the verbal realm. A second area of folly is the financial world. Indeed, the folly here is overwhelming, even devastating, whether you look at the 2008 financial crisis or the 1930s-era Great Depression, or further afield to less well-known but equally devastating financial busts throughout history. But Solomon focuses our attention on a particular kind of financial folly: bribery. Though KJV has "gift," there is no doubt that the word refers particularly to that special kind of gift that we call a bribe. The proverb doesn't quite

say that a bribe always works — just that in the eyes of its owner it works great. Whatever he does goes miraculously well when he applies a little bribery in the right places.

Now, bribery is an age-old practice, and it has been rooted out only by hearty doses of Christian morality and official crackdowns. After all, if you could collect extra money just for doing the job you already have, why wouldn't you? Most of us have been privileged to live our entire life in a region of the world where bribes are almost unheard of. That is a gift from God, because the placement of this proverb between two others about fools suggests that the giving of bribes is just one more instance of folly.

Why is a bribe so foolish? Because it is a form of theft. The one who takes a bribe takes what doesn't belong to him; the one who gives a bribe generally does so out of desperation, not knowing how else to do business.

The Apostle Paul was imprisoned for being found in the middle of a riot. He sat in jail for two years while the Roman Governor Felix waited for Paul to give him a bribe. The apostle refused to do it. Rather than accept the illusory prosperity to which this verse refers, he languished in jail for years.

Bribery may seem attractive. But it is ultimately foolish.

C. Relational, v. 9

Well, the final form of folly profiled here is the most devastating of all. Financial misery is bad, but relational misery is the worst. The relational misery here adverted to refers to keeping a secret. "He who repeats a matter" sounds like making a sing-song chant and saying it over and over. I still remember an incident from my childhood when my friend David Thurston and I were out playing on the dirt pile. I was probably about 9 years old at this time. David had made up a chant about a wheel or tire or something like that, and he was saying it over and over and over. I got fed up with it, and finally I burst out with this proverb: "David, the one who repeats a matter separateth very friends!" In my mind, I was sure that Solomon had had a friend who could not stop repeating some incredibly dumb phrase. That friend wouldn't quit, and so Solomon ended the friendship then and there.

Brothers and sisters, that isn't the case. The word translated "repeats" always refers simply to one single act of repeating. It means telling something only once. *That's how important, and how fragile, friendship is.* Letting out one little thing that was told you in confidence can and will end a friendship.

This, my friends, is a huge mark of folly: in inability to keep a secret, to bury your knowledge deep down where it will never come out. In this fallen world, the skill of friendship is often the skill of keeping your mouth shut. Thus, how do you seek love? You cover a transgression. You don't talk about it. You don't bring it up. You drop it into oblivion and do not resurrect it. That's what God has promised to do with our sins. That's what a true friend does too. When you forgive, you never mention it again. And if you can do that, your friends will love you for it. If they do it for you, you'll love them too. Christ covered our transgressions. Can anything motivate us to love Him more?

II. The Consequences of Folly, vv. 10-13

With folly being so bad, what happens to those who indulge in it?

A. A Hundred Lashes, v. 10

Well, how does a hundred lashes sound — 250% of the maximum penalty allowed in Ancient Israel? A fool won't respond to a hundred blows, whereas a single word of rebuke will make an understanding man stop and consider his ways.

Isn't this proverb so true? I know all of them are true, but I think all of us have seen fools endure horrific consequences and press blithely on in their folly, as though the loss of money, reputation, health, family, and relationships in general were not an overwhelming disaster for them. A fool who experiences a hundred lashes is getting off easy.

So how easily does rebuke enter into you? Do you fight back against those who tell you you're wrong? Do you quietly ignore them? Or do you actually listen and change your approach based on what you hear?

B. A Cruel Messenger, v. 11

Well, another punishment of folly is a cruel messenger — perhaps an angel, perhaps an angry cop, perhaps God's providential vengeance or the pains of Hell itself. The nature of the cruel messenger is not specified, because we all know that the punishments of fools are cruel. Take the motorcyclist who crashed outside my father's office. Half the man's skull was precariously balanced on top of the telephone pole he had run into.

Now, this biker was not necessarily a rebellious man. But the punishment he suffered for going too fast without a helmet was definitely cruel.

Notice, too, the statement about a rebellious man. Someone who's unwilling to work within the parameters of the system, someone whose identity is rebellious, only wants evil. That's what he's looking for. He may think he's seeking good, but he's actually trying to find evil. The '60s rebels who now run our institutions were seeking evil; I think it's no stretch to say that they have found plenty of it.

C. An Angry Mama Bear, v. 12

Indeed, folly is so dangerous that one is better off encountering an angry mama bear than meeting a fool who's in full cry. If the fool is that dangerous to others, how dangerous must he be to himself? Brothers and sisters, I know that none of us have the slightest desire to get anywhere near an angry mother bear. Why would we want to flirt with folly?

D. An Evil Guest who Won't Leave, v. 13

As Charles Bridges commented, this proverb was near the bone for Solomon. Both his parents had repaid Uriah the Hittite with evil for good. The evil that resided in David's house after that point had threatened Solomon's own throne and would tear his kingdom apart after his death. This theme of destruction passed down through the generations is equally prominent in classical myth, where the household of Oedipus suffers as it does because Oedipus' father raped the boy he had been hired to tutor. The destruction and misery that results is truly legendary (sorry).

So what's the point? Don't indulge in the folly of repaying evil for good. Don't mistreat those who have been good to you. If you do, evil may not depart from your house!

III. The Escalation of Folly, v. 14

Well, folly cannot and will not plateau. It always gets worse. God has designed us so that we can't reach a level in our sin and just stay there. We have to be getting better or worse. And so Solomon points out that if you start down the path of folly, it will go downhill fast. It's like letting out water — that is, like the bursting of a dam. What is a little trickle suddenly turns into a tsunami. Hence the escalation from John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry to the full-blown slaughter at Gettysburg. The quarrel started small, but the more it was indulged, the more it grew — not in a linear way, but exponentially.

So quit before the quarrel breaks out. Folly escalates, but wisdom calms things down. Which do you want to pursue? Which did Christ, the prince of peace, pursue?

IV. The Apotheosis of Folly, v. 15

I've titled this last verse of our text "the apotheosis of folly" because unlike the other verses, it labels the folly it describes as a full-blown abomination. What is this folly? It is to justify the wicked and condemn the righteous. Notice how "justify" does not mean "to make righteous" but "to legally declare righteous." It's not an abomination to make bad people into good people; what God abominates is *calling* bad people good when it's not so. Similarly, God hates it when you take the righteous and condemn them as evil. Incidentally, this is why God hates slogans like "I believe her." They assume that we can tell who's righteous and who's wicked without investigating what actually happened. That's not true. It doesn't say "He who justifies the white man, and he who condemns the black woman, is an abomination to the LORD." Rather, to justify the guilty is an evil sin, and to condemn the righteous is an evil sin, regardless of the guilty's color or sex.

God loves justice. But the apotheosis of this anathema came when, at the cross, God condemned the innocent so that He could justify the guilty. In order to change our legal status from "guilty" to "not guilty," God condemned His own innocent Son as guilty. This is folly on a divine scale. How could this be wisdom? Yet it is. It is the death of wisdom, as seen in the death of the Wise Son. But it is the resurrection of wisdom, the only way that wisdom could actually live on earth.

Brothers and sisters, your folly and mine was punished with stripes on the back of Jesus Christ. Your folly and mine was punished on a splinter-laden Roman cross outside Jerusalem in the days of Tiberius Caesar. And that's why God can call you and me not guilty. We are guilty, and we know we are. But our legal status has been changed, because a surety undertook for us. God forbid that we should glory, except in that cross of Christ by which the world has been crucified to us, and we to the world.

Can you love the God who gave His wise Son to death so that you could live? Can you shun folly and seek wisdom in order to glorify Him? I know you can, because Jesus died for you. Live for Him, and God will love you. Amen.