

December 15, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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WISDOM OR FOLLY IN LEADERS Ecclesiastes 10

Solomon's collections of wisdom sayings leave little doubt that there is an extreme and important difference between wisdom and folly. At least twenty-eight times in the collection of Proverbs alone, Solomon contrasts wisdom with folly, the wise person with the fool.

Chapter ten in Ecclesiastes continues that theme. The structure, or outline, is a bit hard to identify. The information is more like a loose collection of wisdom statements that are simply related in the theme of wisdom versus folly. At the same time, there is a repeated reference to the wisdom or foolishness of those who are in authority, such as kings.

If there was ever a time in the history of our nation when leaders chose the wrong side of that contrast, today is the day. And that problem is not just abundant in Washington. Local governments, city governments, businesses, schools, churches, and homes seem to be plagued with leadership that has no concept of wisdom. Indeed, if this is actually the case, there is a good reason for it. Wisdom is found first in a right relationship with God. We have referred to Solomon's statement on the matter a couple of times previously: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10)*.

The culture that rejects God's authority, rejects God's Word as the authority for teaching and practice, rejects God's people as irrelevant or even dangerous, will be left with dire consequences. That culture, those people, will experience God's law of sowing and reaping. Reject God's wisdom and you will soon discover that your life is characterized by lack of wisdom, which is foolishness.

Let's learn how important it is to choose wisdom over the natural bent toward foolishness.

A Little Folly Leaves a Terrible Odor. (vv.1-3)

The Preacher began this section of his conclusions about life by contrasting foolishness to wisdom. He determined that folly is heavier than wisdom. Granted, the text doesn't seem to say that. But, we will see that such is the conclusion. In fact, what Solomon did say doesn't seem to make much sense. *Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench (v.1a)*.

It is indeed an ugly illustration of the problem. But then again, the problem itself is quite ugly. The picture would have made a lot of sense to people familiar with the ancient apothecary. Dead flies in the ointment would certainly cause a repugnant odor – one you probably wouldn't soon forget. This would have been especially true because the expected aroma should have been pleasant to the senses, but instead it was a stench.

A modern example might be similar to you men buying your wife a 7.5 oz. bottle of Chanel Beauty, No.5, Parfum Grand Extrait for Christmas for the price of \$2,150. Sure that sounds like an exorbitant price, but remember that includes free shipping. Obviously, for that price you have the right to expect perfection. What if your wife opened that treasured gift on Christmas morning, only to see a couple of dead flies floating on the top? It would be a nightmare both of you would not soon forget.

The point the Preacher illustrated is, *So a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor (v.1b)*. Or we would say, a little folly causes a lot of damage. First, in order to understand the lesson, we need to understand what Solomon meant by "folly." Folly is what fools do. The fool in wisdom literature is not a mentally deficient or academically challenged person. The fool is the person who clearly, often intentionally, chooses to live contrary to God's truth and out of fellowship with God.

According to David, the fool makes a determined choice. *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God" (Psalm 14:1a)*. Having set his course in that direction, the fool becomes known by the consequences of his choice. *They are corrupt, they do abominable*

deeds, there is none who does good (Psalm 14:1b). Therefore, throughout Scripture (and in life) we see the fool characterized as arrogant, self-centered, proud, and determined to have his or her way contrary to the plans, desires, lives of others, and especially contrary to God's will.

Now the Preacher's point is that such wrong choices can destroy the beautiful house that wisdom and honor have built. Again, true wisdom is following after God. It begins with a right relationship with God, which is awesome respect for God coupled with honest humility regarding ourselves. The wisdom that is obtained by fearing God is maintained by knowing God's Word, by practicing God's Word, and by asking God to enlighten when we are at a loss for knowledge.

Our text concludes that the result of following God should be honor. The Hebrew word for *honor* actually means "heavy." Thus, the assertion that wisdom is heavier than folly. In the original sense of the word, honor is good weight or a value assessed. To have honor is to have a good reputation that is generally built over years of wise living. Therefore, the word of the honorable person carries a lot of weight.

However, the wise man discovered in his investigation of life under the sun that one act of foolishness, a few moments of folly, can completely undo and destroy the reputation it took years to build. We see this demonstrated too often in individual leaders, successful companies, organizations, and governments.

Having established an important contrast between wisdom and folly, the Preacher moved to the next step, which is a contrast between right-wing and left-wing ideologies (v.2). *A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left (v.2).* This is actually a Bible standard. Is that a fair contrast? The Bible standard is not intended to offend left-handed people. Pat and I have a left-handed son we love dearly.

However, the Bible does picture the right hand as the position of power or blessing, and, at the same time, pictures the left hand as not so much. For example, Abraham gave Lot the choice of land on the right hand or left hand. Lot chose the left and went to Sodom. We know how that turned out. Jacob showed the superior blessing by placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, much to Joseph's

disapproval. Moses' song of praise declared, *Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy (Exodus 15:6).* David wrote, *At God's right hand are pleasures forever (Psalm 16:11).* Jesus, God the Son, is *seated at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 7:56).* In the last day, Jesus will separate the people who will enter the kingdom by placing them (the sheep) on His right hand, and placing those who are destined for eternal punishment (the goats) on His left hand (Matthew 25:33).

What then is the Preacher's point? The wise man will order his life according to that which characterizes God's wisdom, righteousness, power, glory. The fool will be characterized by that which is opposed to God. According to that description, no political ideology in America can truly be characterized as "right wing" in the sense of our passage. However, one would think that people who are characterized, in a broad and general way, by an anti-Bible platform (i.e. abortion, LGBTQ, redistribution of earnings, etc.) would cringe to be known as "the Left." Instead, it appears that most of those people take great pride in being on the left, being in conflict with the clearly revealed righteous standard of God.

When a person makes the choice to reject God's wisdom, the right, and embrace foolishness, the left, the fool becomes obvious (v.3). *Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool (v.3).* This statement reveals that the fool is a fool in the most basic matters of life, not just in matters of academics or wisdom. Even in matters as simple as walking along the road. And yet the reference here is not just simple walking, but a way, a direction in life.

The fool who has said "No" to God is obviously a fool. This conclusion assumes that some folks are wise and, therefore, can see a contrast to wisdom. If everyone is also a fool, one who has rejected God and His wisdom, it appears that the fools are correct and the few nonconformists are incorrect. That folly is often manifested by authorities or in a fool's relationship to authorities.

Relationship With Authorities. (vv.4-7)

What is a person supposed to do when, while trying to live wisely, he or she gets crossed up with a God-ordained authority? Solomon recommends that we stand still and watch God work (v.4). The opening hypothetical situation in verse four hints that an authority's anger may or may not be justified. *If the anger of the ruler rises against you . . . (v.4a)*. Even the Bible is replete with examples of rulers becoming angry with good people. For example, Pharaoh was plenty angry with Moses and Aaron. King Saul was angry enough with David to try to kill him. King Zedekiah was angry with Jeremiah, who simply told the people God's message. King Nebuchadnezzar was furious with the three Hebrew guys who refused to worship him. King Herod was angry with the apostles.

So what do you do when your authority grows angry with you? This principle can apply in any authority/subordinate relationship. When your authority is angry, do you respond by defending yourself? Do you try to excuse your error if you made a mistake? Do you lie in an effort to protect yourself? Do you fight or run away? We must admit that in all of these proposed responses, there may be a legitimate time when physical self-defense is necessary. But that is not the scenario in this verse.

How do you respond when your authority is angry with you? Rest calmly in God. *Do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest (v.4b)*. Instead of responding in anger, vengeance, defense, just wait for God to do His work. This is especially important because it may not be clear if your authority is wise or foolish. Let's face it, leaders (especially modern leaders) are not automatically wise. In truth, we know that most of our political leaders have clearly said "No!" to God, which makes them fools. And God has promised that the arrogant fool will be revealed for what he is (Proverbs 13:16). God has promised that the proud will be humbled (Psalm 147:6). God has promised that, in time, the unjust person's foot will slip (Deuteronomy 32:35). Therefore, we can wait quietly for God to carry out His promises.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised when our authorities are foolish and that they will direct anger toward us. We need to expect sin to proliferate in a sinful world (vv.5-7). Sin has been the

polar opposite of God's will from the beginning. God created everything and everyone "good." All was right. All was as it should be. Sin changed everything, and we see evidence of the backwardness, ridiculousness of what sinful humans call good and right.

Maybe you have seen the new fad of upside-down Christmas trees. There is one downtown in the Festival of Lights Christmas tree display. It doesn't take an expert with a degree in interior design to conclude that Christmas trees are not supposed to have the point down. Have you ever seen any tree grow upside down?

That is the kind of thing the Preacher saw everywhere in life under the sun. He concluded that foolishness should not be in the palace because that looks like an upside-down Christmas tree. *There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place (vv.5-6)*.

An *evil under the sun* is another example of the problem with the sin principle. Because of unrighteousness and foolishness, the "ruler" can make errors in judgment. Maybe, for example, the authority appoints a fool to a high place and ignores the person who has proven to be wise, or puts the wise person in a low position. Exalting the incompetent and debasing the proven achiever causes much evil. This practice in businesses, schools, and governments is pretty good evidence that the wisdom of God is missing. Often in history, leadership being devoid of God's wisdom is an indication of God's judgment.

When error proceeds from the ruler, the culture will eventually be standing on its head. *I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves (v.7)*. As soon as we see the word *slaves* in this text, we might conclude that this is an irrelevant reference to a past age. But, this is not an illustration relegated to ancient times. It is still applicable. First, let's not forget that slavery is alive and well in the world today. Modern-day slavery refers to any form of forced human exploitation for labor or service, such as human trafficking and forced labor. Unfortunately, slavery still exists today in over 130 countries. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that over 21 million people are victims of modern-day

slavery. North Korea and Eritrea are the biggest offenders in this crime.

In Solomon's day, the slave was a person who was owned by another and generally employed in menial tasks. In class systems, it is hard to break out of the slavery class. Therefore, a sign of a culture standing on its head in that day was for the slave to be riding a horse (which was a sign of power and authority), while the prince (who truly was an authority) walked on the ground like a slave would do. This statement is not a commentary on the travesty of slavery or the wickedness of aristocracy. It is a conclusion based on the observed norm of Solomon's day. This is a picture of the folly of rulers and authorities who have rejected the wisdom of God. History is replete with examples, especially history being made today and tomorrow.

Sowing and Reaping. (vv.8-11)

Probably these pictures are an outflow of the previous text regarding rulers, authorities, and politicians. Verses eight and nine illustrate the often stated principle in Scripture that we reap what we sow (vv.8-9). Specifically, the Preacher warned that your plan can backfire. *He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall (v.8).*

This statement pictures malicious intent. Maybe it refers to the scheming of the ruler just mentioned. Or it could be the scheming of someone against the foolish ruler. Whatever it is, it expresses God's law of sowing and reaping. Specifically, someone digs a pit in order to trap an adversary. But, the digger falls into the pit. Or similarly, someone breaks into a place where he should not be and is bitten by a poisonous snake. This is the very same principle David gave us in Psalm seven. *Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies. He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends (Psalm 7:14-16).*

Doesn't this sound like what happened to the rulers who plotted against Jeremiah. *Then they said, "Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him*

with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words." Hear me, O LORD, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them. Therefore deliver up their children to famine; give them over to the power of the sword; let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be struck down by the sword in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses, when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them! For they have dug a pit to take me and laid snares for my feet (Jeremiah 18:18-22).

So the wise person concludes that vengeance against a supposed adversary is a bad idea. Far better to invest your time and energy in a profitable venture. Yes, but sometimes, in an evil world under the sun, even that doesn't work out. Even legitimate works can go awry. *He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them (v.9).* Quarrying stone and splitting firewood carries their own inherent dangers. The lesson is: "Choose what you do wisely." Exercise wisdom in whatever you pursue.

In the next two verses, the Preacher gave us two hypothetical situations that illustrate the importance of exercising wisdom in daily work (vv.10-11). First, using wisdom is like sharpening an axe. *If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed (v.10).* The right tool, well maintained, makes the work easier and more profitable. Wisdom applied to any endeavor helps one to succeed.

The second hypothetical situation teaches the importance of using wisdom before the serpent bites. *If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer (v.11).* Apparently, snake charming takes a unique and special skill. But, there is no point in trying to apply the skill after the snake has struck. So, too, life takes special skill, the wisdom God gives. Trying to apply the wisdom of God after you have messed up a situation won't change that situation. Use wisdom first. That is a lesson leaders need to learn and practice.

Wisdom Versus Folly. (vv.12-15)

An important principle to remember is that wisdom brings favor but folly results in evil (vv.12-13). This becomes obvious in life because words have significant results. *The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him (v.12)*. Along that same line of argument, the fool's words lead to utter confusion. *The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness (v.13)*.

This is something fools do not know and apparently cannot understand (vv.14-15). To himself and to his friends, the fool sounds like an authority. *A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him (v.14)?* However, in reality, the fool is ignorant of the most basic wisdom. *The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city (v.15)*. People like this do not make good rulers or authorities.

Known Truth is Too Often Ignored. (vv.16-20)

One truth that is often ignored is that good leaders have good character (vv.16-17). Conversely, bad leaders create toxic societies (v.16). *Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning (v.16)!* This is a picture of immaturity in places of authority, and the resultant lack of discipline. The word translated “Woe” alerts to a terrible, desperate situation. It is not a pretty picture as we know from our current experience in America. We are feeling the woe Solomon addressed here because our leaders truly act more like children than mature, wise adults.

The difference between bad and good leaders is that good leaders lead themselves first (v.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 (v.17)!* An undisciplined leader is a blight on the land, the company, the church. Lack of discipline is demonstrated in a “the organization is for my benefit” attitude. That leads to gluttony and drunkenness, both literal and figurative.

The good leader “feasts” at the proper time and for the proper reasons. A real leader senses a responsibility for the people he or she is leading. An immature, selfish leader leads for the praise of people. Or in line with our current trends, a bad leader will not lead for the ultimate long-lasting good of the people but will shrewdly lead to make the people dependent on his or her “goodwill” in distributing the blessings of other people's money.

That is a foolish position to take because, ultimately, money is not the “fix-all” answer (vv.18-20). It might appear that money can fix all problems when we observe the very practical problem of the lazy person who makes little money. *Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks (v.18)*. This statement teaches that hard work is still necessary if we are going to maintain the possessions God has given us. The principle of hard work is still prescribed and blessed by God. God graciously gives us material blessings, but we are responsible to maintain what He has given.

If each successive generation does not understand the source of blessing (whether it is material blessings or ideological blessings like our freedoms), they will not work to maintain them. How long before the previously God-given blessings disappear? And when they are gone, how will we get them back? And some millennial somewhere retorts, “No, let's just enjoy the benefits while we have them and let the next generation worry about their depletion!”

That conclusion is to think that we can enjoy the material blessings of the previous generation without carefully managing them to pass on to the next generation. All generations are aware that money does bring benefits. *Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything (v.19)*. Possibly this is a positive statement commending the fruits of hard work. Or possibly these are “tongue-in-cheek” statements.

Either way, the lesson is that we need to learn to control our thinking because thinking is born out in actions. *Even in your thought, 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 (v.20)*. The principle warns us to be careful about how we think. Sure, the beauty is that no one can read our minds. But the danger is that what we think too often ends up in words. Wrong words can cause a conflict with our authorities – which brings us back to the

beginning of the sermon. Wisdom is better than folly. It is sad when people in places of authority are characterized by foolishness. The saddest part of that is that foolishness is the result of rejecting God and His wisdom. We know better than that. Let's live like we know better.