

## **It's the Little Sins**

Ecclesiastes 10:1-3; Philippians 2:13

October 22, 2006

Rev. Greg L. Price

As Christians who desire to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, your focus in addressing sin in your life is so often upon what you may perceive to be the big sins, the besetting sins, the sins that have ensnared you time and time again. Obviously, the most conspicuous sins must be taken seriously. We must grieve over the offence they are to God. We must seek the forgiveness of God. We must cry out to God in prayer that He would mercifully deliver us from the power of these sins. We must endeavor new obedience. We must watch and pray that we enter not into temptation, taking all steps that we can to heed the warning signs and the red flashing lights that are going off in our minds that there is real danger ahead if we cross those tracks. We must not flirt and toy with temptation, because we will get burned. It makes sense that we would work especially hard by God's grace to see the Spirit subdue these more conspicuous sins in our lives. For the more conspicuous, the more likely they will not only offend God, but offend others as well.

However, God through His inspired Preacher, Solomon, would have you realize that even in the lives of those who are most wise and most mature in the faith, it is the little foxes that often spoil the vines by gaining an entrance into your life by stealth and secrecy. After all, compared to those ox-like sins, those fox-like sins may seem relatively puny, and for that very reason they can sneak in unaware and can spoil the fruit in your life before you are fully aware of their presence. There is a warning in our text this Lord's Day that those who are growing in heavenly wisdom are not only to be concerned for the conspicuous ox-like sins, but are also to be concerned for the subtle fox-like sins. In fact, that fox can change into an ox, if you are not aware of the schemes and plots of the enemy of your soul.

Our main points from Ecclesiastes 10:1-3 are the following: (1) A Little Folly Destroys a Person's Good Name (Ecclesiastes 10:1); (2) Folly Makes a Person Ineffective in His/Her Work (Ecclesiastes 10:2); (3) Folly Is Revealed in the Presence of Many (Ecclesiastes 10:3).

### **I. A Little Folly Destroys a Person's Good Name (Ecclesiastes 10:1).**

A. Solomon (in the closing verses of Ecclesiastes 9) had illustrated, by way of a story about a poor wise man that delivered a small city from a mighty king, the value of heavenly wisdom as being better than the strength of one's resources, better than one's loud voice, and better than the military might of nations. Solomon now gives a word of warning to Christians who graciously and humbly manifest this heavenly wisdom, so that they do not rest presumptuously on their heavenly wisdom and overlook the subtle temptations of the enemy that would lead them to soil their reputation or their work in the presence of many.

B. Using practical illustrations with which the people of that time would be familiar, Solomon describes an apothecary, who is one who makes perfume, as we see in Exodus 30:25. These perfumes were used for both the living and the dead. The apothecary mixed his oils and spices together to form aromas that were most pleasurable to the smell. But in the case before us, it would seem that while the apothecary was away from his work, flies found the bottle of perfume left opened and flew into the bottle, but were unable to escape and died in the bottle of perfume. Apparently, these little dead flies were not immediately discovered by the apothecary, and they caused a foul odor to arise from the perfume. Those little pesky flies, that managed to get into the fragrant ointment and to die there, tainted the whole ointment with a foul smell.

C. Solomon (in the latter part of Ecclesiastes 10:1) now draws from the illustration the moral truth that he seeks to impress upon us. Just as little flies that die in a bottle of aromatic perfume may cause the

perfume to stink, so likewise, little follies and indiscretions that manifest themselves in the life of one who is honorable and wise may cause his/her good name to stink. There are a couple truths to be applied from this moral principle.

1. How watchful you must be over your life and diligent in guarding yourself against not only the most conspicuous sins, but also against even minor indiscretions, for the enemy is just waiting for you to make even a small false step (he is waiting for a fly in the ointment, even if there is no camel in the ointment). It would appear that the apothecary was not watchful, but was negligent in leaving the lid off the bottle, and thus allowing the flies into the ointment. You see here how the enemy of your soul haunts those who have an honorable reputation, just waiting for the lid to be removed and forgotten, and then seeking to expose some area of weakness and to blow it out of proportion to such a degree that the good name of the honorable man is darkened like a black eye. Dear ones, if you rest on your laurels at any time, taking pride in your honorable position or presuming upon the grace of God by ignoring that little lie, or that subtle misrepresentation, or that inconspicuous praise you offer yourself, or that biting criticism of others, or that unguarded word of anger that escapes from your mouth, or that lustful thought, you will likely find yourself sooner or later mourning over your lack of due care in watching over your soul. David's adulterous sin with Bathsheba began with looking upon her with lust in his heart. Adam and Eve's sin in eating the forbidden fruit, and thus murdering all future generations, began by questioning and distorting the truth of what God had said (Genesis 3:1-6). Peter's sin in denying the Lord began with thinking he could never fall into that very sin (Mark 14:31). This warning of Solomon is especially true for those whose walk with the Lord is ever growing and ever maturing—whose life is like a light in a dark room. It is not so much those whose sins and weaknesses are very conspicuous to everyone around them that these little peccadilloes and faults will so severely damage, but rather those whose life is marked by godliness and holiness that will more greatly be stained by these small flies. Now that is not to say that there is no need for sorrow, repentance, and forgiveness for even offences that are relatively minor in comparison to greater and more aggravated offences. It is simply to say that the enemy of your soul will make even the least offence into a major offence in tarnishing the reputation of those who are otherwise honorable. Therefore, take special care that you heed the words of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Dear ones, do not consider a sin so small and insignificant that you do not need to deal with it swiftly, but rather pass over it, ignore it, and forget about it. All sin is transgression of the law of God and is an offence against Him (whether in thought, word, or deed). Your most gracious and blessed Savior did not die to redeem you from the penalty of merely those most conspicuous sins, but Christ died to cleanse you from the guilt and penalty for all your sin (even those sins that are not conspicuous, even those sins that are not seen by others, even those sins of which you are not aware yourself, such as sins of ignorance) according to Colossians 2:13 ("having forgiven you ALL TRANSGRESSIONS"). Remember to pray in all earnestness with David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

2. Another truth to be applied from what Solomon here offers by way of warning should be given to any of you who would look for the little offences and faults in others in order to make something great from them and thereby tarnish the reputation of others. Dear ones, you are not free of sin when you magnify a fly-like sin of another into a camel-like sin, and when you are not willing to allow love to cover sins that are not so aggravated in nature or do not affect others in such negative ways. You must be charitable with those smaller grievances you have toward one another, allowing love to cover a multitude of such smaller offences, lest you literally be consumed in devouring one another. What a world of hurt your marriage would be in if you did not pass over even the slightest offence but believed you must report and correct every offence with your spouse as if it was a major offence. There would never be any peace in your marriage. Such a strict scrutiny of the smallest detail would quickly sour the relationship into a mere legal relationship, rather than an affectionate relationship. Such a relationship develops into one in which you begin to look for the

faults and sins of others, rather than seeking to cover the faults and sins of others as much as possible. Clearly, the Lord promotes the practice of speaking the truth in love with others by confronting personal sins—when your brother or sister believes you have sinned against him/her as the Lord Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-24 and when you believe your brother or sister has sinned against you as your Savior says in Matthew 18:15. Follow the words of Christ, but also remember that less aggravated faults or sins that one commits should not be treated by as reasons to attack the good name and reputations of others (and especially of those who are seeking to walk faithfully before the Lord and others). Your duty according to the Ninth Commandment is not only to defend and protect your own good name against malicious slander, but also to defend and protect the good name of others in every way that you can, and only exposing the sins of others when those sins are clear violations of God's commandments, serious violations of God's commandments, unrepentant or public violations of God's commandments, and will lead others into the same sins if not exposed. Dear ones, you may not be the fly in the ointment, but you may certainly be the one who makes the ointment to stink by unnecessarily making a lesser offence into a greater offence. This sin on your part can so often be simply out of jealousy or covetousness over the gifts of others, or over the wisdom and honor of others, or over the wealth and success of others. How wicked if you delight in the fall of a brother or sister, and if you are not broken and humbled at the fall or discipline of a brother or sister. As you look at the sins of others (whether the sins be conspicuous or inconspicuous), your attitude should always be before going to others to discuss with them their sin, "But for the grace of God, there go I—But for the gracious restraint of God, there go I."

## **II. Folly Makes a Person Ineffective in His/Her Work (Ecclesiastes 10:2).**

A. Solomon now moves to an illustration in order to demonstrate how heavenly wisdom makes you effective in your work, but how folly makes you ineffective in your work.

1. It has been noted many times previously as wisdom and folly have been discussed that heavenly wisdom is the gracious ability freely given to those who see their sin in all of its corruption and its offence against a holy God and turn in faith to Christ alone for the righteousness they need, for the forgiveness they need, and for the everlasting life that they need. Heavenly wisdom is not only the knowledge of the truth revealed by Christ, but is additionally the application of that truth to every area of your life. It is not only knowing rationally the truth of Christ, but it is also living practically the truth of Christ that one professes to know. One is exercising the grace of heavenly wisdom when one endeavors and grows in disciplining oneself by the grace of God to think, speak, and act according to the Word of Christ. When you cease to be a forgetful hearer and become an effectual doer in that which the Lord has so graciously revealed to you about His truth, you are manifesting heavenly wisdom.

a. For example, when I learn from the Word of Christ that God is omniscient (knows everything about me—even that which is hidden from the view of others, as is noted in Psalm 139:1-6) and is omnipresent (sees me in every circumstance, so that I am never removed from His presence, as is revealed in Psalm 139:7-12), how does heavenly wisdom practically apply that truth about God in the life of the Christian?

(1) One way would be in realizing that since you are an open book to God, it is nonsense on your part to act as though you can hide anything from Him that is in your heart or that is done secretly. If you are applying this truth about God to your life, you will learn to be far more honest and transparent in your time of prayer before the Lord in confessing your sin and expressing your deepest need of Him (which will in turn teach you to be far more truthful in your speech with one another—the reason we lie to others is because we have no problem lying to God).

(2) This truth about God ought to help you to appreciate the love and grace of God, for He who knows the worst about you has shown you the greatest love in sending Christ to bear the full wrath of God against your many sins. God is not surprised by your sins. He is not caught off guard by your

sins. And yet from all eternity the Father and the Son covenanted with one another to secure the salvation of undeserving and unworthy sinners like you and me (Ephesians 1:3-6).

(3) This truth about God ought to lead you to see the folly of living a life of hypocrisy, wherein you live a godly life in the presence of others, but live an ungodly life when you are all alone with your computer, with your magazines, or with your movies.

(4) This truth about God ought to teach you to consciously live your life in the very presence of Almighty God and to realize that sin is committed before Him and that obedience is likewise committed before Him. Unrepentant sin will be disciplined by the all-seeing God and faithfulness and obedience will be rewarded by the all-seeing God.

(5) This truth about God ought to help you to realize that when you are afflicted with illness, when you are in great sorrow over the loss of a loved one or the loss of a relationship with a loved one, when you are struggling with sin in your life, when you endure the unjustified attacks of others, when you suffer financially in being able to meet your needs, when you cry out to the Lord in desperation and do not immediately sense His comfort or encouragement, you know that He sees us and knows what you are enduring. You know He has not forgotten you, but has a most wise and most holy and most good reason for ordaining and not removing that hardship.

b. After the Lord Jesus had multiplied the fish and the bread to feed the five thousand, He sent His disciples across the Sea of Galilee, and He went into a mountain to pray (according to Mark 6:45ff). From that mountain, the Lord Jesus saw His disciples struggling greatly in the great storm that came upon them on the Sea of Galilee, and yet He did not immediately intervene. In fact, the text says that Christ came walking on the water, and made it appear that He was going to walk right pass them. The disciples cried out thinking He was a spirit, and He comforted them and came into their boat, causing the storm to immediately cease. The Lord Jesus saw them with His all-seeing eye struggling for their lives, and He ordained this event in order to build their faith and trust in Him and to turn them away from trusting with ultimate confidence in their own resources to save them as experienced fishermen. The storm was meant for the good of the disciples.

2. If heavenly wisdom is applying the truth of Christ that you know, then folly is not applying the truth of Christ that you know or that you ought to know. Folly is not out to please, serve, or submit to the Lord, but is out to please, serve, and follow oneself. Folly despises instruction, correction, and submission, because it hinders one from doing what he/she wants to do. Folly is rebellion against the Lord and His good and holy commandments. Dear ones, you are indeed foolish when you flirt and toy with temptation. When you know the danger of falling into sin and yet you seem to want to get as close to the edge of the cliff as you can without falling over the cliff—that is folly. Folly lies and deceives and makes you believe there will be no consequences to your sins. Folly makes you unfit and incapable to serve Christ, your family, the church, or society at large.

B. Solomon states here in Ecclesiastes 10:2 that “a wise man’s heart is at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left.” The right hand was viewed as the hand of power as may be seen in Exodus 15:6 and Psalm 17:7. The right hand was also viewed as the hand of blessing and honor as may be seen in Psalm 110:1 and Matthew 25:34—whereas the left hand was viewed as the hand of dishonor (Matthew 25:41). Thus, Solomon is saying here in Ecclesiastes 10:2 that heavenly wisdom makes a person fit and able to effectively perform the duties and work that God has given to him/her to do (to the glory of God). Whereas folly makes a person unfit and unable to effectively perform to God’s glory the duties and work that God has given to him/her to do. What can you learn from this truth?

1. Work is necessary, and it is good. In fact, that was even the case before the fall of man into sin, as Adam was given the Garden of Eden in order to cultivate it and in order to benefit from his work in the Garden (Genesis 2:15). One of the effects of the fall of man into sin was that he would from that point be

working hard and by the sweat of his brow to provide for himself and his loved ones. Dear ones, the chief end of man is not to glorify himself and to enjoy himself now and forever. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him now and forever. Life is not all about having fun. Life is all about God working within us to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). To the degree that you learn to take delight in willing and doing His good pleasure, to that same degree you will grow in the joy of the Lord. And to the degree that you grumble and complain about willing and doing God's good pleasure in every circumstance, to that same degree you will be deprived of the joy of the Lord. If Solomon says here that the wise man's heart is at his right hand to perform the work and duties God has given to him, then you must acknowledge the goodness, the profit, and the benefit of the work God has called you to do (regardless of what that work may be at this time—whether that work seems menial, a waste of time, or going nowhere—it is not the importance of your work in the eyes of man that matters to God, but the diligence and faithfulness with which you do that work to the glory of God and to the service of others that matters to Him). He who is faithful in little will be faithful in much. He who is unfaithful in little cannot be trusted with more. Dear ones, when you complain about your unappreciated work or unrewarding work, realize that God has you there for the time in order to learn and to grow in Christ. It is not wasted time, for you are in the school of Christ. It is folly on your part when you forget that Christ is stretching you and taking you out of your comfort zones for your good.

2. Heavenly wisdom prepares a person to do his/her work effectively. Heavenly wisdom is not lazy—folly is. Heavenly wisdom does not procrastinate—folly does. Heavenly wisdom seeks to finish projects that are begun—folly prepares you for a life of unfinished projects. How you need heavenly wisdom, so that you do not quit just because life does not work out the way you wanted it to work out, or quit just because you were not treated the way you believe you should have been treated by others. Heavenly wisdom is not a quitter—folly is. Heavenly wisdom perseveres and gets up even when it is knocked down or falls down a hundred times—folly gives up because life is too hard, or people are not fair, or growing in Christ is too painful. How you need heavenly wisdom in order to be ready for every good work God gives to you—whether it be washing the feet of others or being exalted in the sight of others—whether it be dying for the testimony of Christ or living in prosperity according to the blessing and will of Christ. Do you desire heavenly wisdom more than silver or gold? If not, you will never have heavenly wisdom. Plead with the Lord to grant you a hungering and thirsting for heavenly wisdom. Dear ones, there is no neutral ground. If you do not hunger and thirst for heavenly wisdom, you will desire folly.

### **III. Folly Is Revealed in the Presence of Many (Ecclesiastes 10:3).**

A. Solomon closes this section by saying that the quality of wisdom that a person possesses will be manifested when difficult times come into his/her life. The worldly wisdom of the fool will fail when true wisdom is most needed, whereas the heavenly wisdom of the one trusting in Christ will find him/her when it is most needed. This is true every day as you observe whether you are applying the truth of Christ by way of heavenly wisdom to your life or whether you are depending upon your own mere earthly resources to meet every problem you face in life. Trusting with supreme confidence in your own human gifts, abilities, and resources is a worldly wisdom that will fail you in the presence of many when the going gets tough. Trusting in Christ and looking to His infinite resources to meet your every need is heavenly wisdom.

B. The person who is wise in his/her own eyes and in the eyes of the world will be revealed to be the most foolish on the final day of judgment, when we all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For that person's supposed wisdom will fail him/her in the presence of many as the Lord Jesus calls that one a fool for having trusted in one's own righteousness, riches, baptism, or in one's church to save him/her. But heavenly wisdom will cause one who embraces Christ by faith alone to stand on that final Day of Judgment.