

## Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20

### Wisdom and Folly

In our current section of Ecclesiastes Solomon thought it good to remind us again of the importance of wisdom and the danger of folly. Let me try and define folly for you. A fool in the biblical sense is not necessarily someone with a small intellect. In other words folly doesn't show up at the low end of an IQ test. Rather, folly or foolishness refers to someone who lacks the proper fear or respect for God. He or she is therefore prone to go in the wrong direction in life. Psalm 14:1 says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

Ecclesiastes has told us that a fool is lazy, ill-tempered, morally blind and refuses to take advice. They are self-centered, a know-it-all and arrogant. In our comparison of wisdom and folly we are going to read from chapter 9 verse 13 to the end of chapter 10. It is a list of short stories, maxims, proverbs, comparisons and exhortations. So let's begin.

This wisdom I have also seen under the sun, and it seemed great to me: <sup>14</sup>There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it, besieged it, and built great snares around it.

<sup>15</sup>Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man.

(Ecclesiastes 9:13-15)

Wisdom is not just a rich person's attribute. Both poor and rich can be wise. And sometimes one person can be wise enough to keep a town, or a family or a company safe from ruin. We don't know how the rich man saved the city. But Solomon said it was a great lesson. The city had almost no chance to survive. Its enemy was powerful. But as we learned last week the battle is not always to the strong.<sup>1</sup>

Wisdom saved a city where weapons of war could not. The sad fact is when the disaster was over the poor man was forgotten. There are examples of this in the Bible. Think of Joseph. When Joseph was in prison he had the wisdom to interpret a dream that helped the King's butler get out of jail. Joseph had good reason to hope that the butler would help him to be released. But the butler totally forgot about Joseph. Lesson: do what is good and right even if no

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:11

one applauds you. God knows and He will reward you in the best way at the right time.

Then I said:

“Wisdom *is* better than strength.

Nevertheless the poor man's wisdom *is* despised,

And his words are not heard.

<sup>17</sup> Words of the wise, *spoken quietly, should be heard*

Rather than the shout of a ruler of fools.

<sup>18</sup> Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war;

But one sinner destroys much good.”

(Ecclesiastes 9:16-18)

The loudest voice is not always the wisest one. And even the best laid plans can get ruined by someone who sins or fails to do what is good and right. It seems at times that sin touches just about everything, even the best things and ruins it.

Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment,

And cause it to give off a foul odor;

So does a little folly to one respected for wisdom *and* honor.

(Ecclesiastes 10:1)

Be careful how you live. Be wise, be sharp. Let the Word of God teach you how to live and then obey what you have learned. One little act of folly, one indiscretion, can ruin your reputation. As Christian believers our words and actions testify to either the beauty and power of Jesus Christ or to the uselessness of Christ. What kind of witness do we want to be?

A wise man's heart *is* at his right hand,

But a fool's heart at his left.

<sup>3</sup> Even when a fool walks along the way,

He lacks wisdom,

And he shows everyone *that* he *is* a fool.

With my apology to left-handers, the Bible generally treats the right hand as honorable, good and blessed and the left as unskilled and without honor. For example Jesus has been exalted to sit at God's right hand. And we have been exalted there as well, through our union with Christ.<sup>2</sup>

When the Preacher says a fool's heart is at his left hand, he means this person is going in the wrong direction in life. Think of the contrast between

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 1:20; 2:6

Abraham and Lot. When these two men moved out from one another and divided the land of promise, Abraham was content with what God had provided. Lot saw that the grass was greener on the other side of the fence. But eventually he and his family wound up in Sodom.

Why is someone wise or foolish? The answer is that it is an issue of the heart. Are we blindly chasing after all the things the world values? Or are we pressing ahead towards the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ?<sup>3</sup> Sometimes in life fools seem to be everywhere: in our extended families, at school, at work and even in the government. Mark Twain once said "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself."

If the spirit of the ruler rises against you,  
Do not leave your post;  
For conciliation pacifies great offenses.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:4)

If you find yourself in a situation where a superior is against you unjustly, stay true to what you believe, but don't storm out and don't retaliate. Remember Jesus Christ was treated unjustly, but he committed himself to God's care.<sup>4</sup>

There is an evil I have seen under the sun,  
As an error proceeding from the ruler:  
<sup>6</sup> Folly is set in great dignity,  
While the rich sit in a lowly place.  
<sup>7</sup> I have seen servants on horses,  
While princes walk on the ground like servants.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:5-7)

In life it is often a topsy-turvy world. Sometimes fools govern and are given power. Do you remember the movie "The Sound of Music"? The oldest daughter in the Von Trapp family is named Liesl. A young Austrian named Rolf likes her. When he first appears in the movie he is a shy messenger boy.

But the Nazi's push into Austria and take over. Rolf joins the Hitler Youth Organization and is given a whistle and a little authority. Suddenly he becomes more powerful than Captain Von Trapp. And at one point while trying to escape, the whole Von Trapp family is in danger because Rolf sees them and blows his whistle.

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 3:12-14

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 2:13-21

He who digs a pit will fall into it,  
And whoever breaks through a wall will be  
bitten by a serpent.  
<sup>9</sup> He who quarries stones may be hurt by them,  
And he who splits wood may be endangered by it.  
<sup>10</sup> If the ax is dull,  
And one does not sharpen the edge,  
Then he must use more strength;  
But wisdom brings success.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:8-10)

In these verses Solomon is describing people who are doing their work, but were injured because they were foolish. One dug a pit, perhaps for a well or a trap for an animal. But he fell into the pit, because he was careless. Another broke through a wall, like a stone fence and was bitten by a snake. Snakes often hide themselves in the holes or crevices along stone walls. He should have been aware of this fact. Another person is at a rock quarry. Maybe he was wearing sandals instead of steel toed boots. And in verse 10 we have the fool par excellence—someone trying to split wood with a dull axe.

A serpent may bite when *it is* not charmed;  
The babbler is no different.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:11)

The Revised English Version of the Bible translates this verse as follows: “If a snake bites before it is charmed, the snake charmer loses his fee.” He will probably lose his life too!

Let’s apply all of this to life. In most areas of life we know the right thing to do. So did all of the workers above, including the snake charmer. But we often don’t think things through. We look for short cuts, we act too hastily and we take things for granted. Sometimes we think we know what to do because we have done it hundreds of times before. But if we do not act with wisdom you can get bit by the world. The world is often not a safe place. There are dangers and temptations everywhere, so watch out. Jesus told his disciples, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”<sup>5</sup>

The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious,  
But the lips of a fool shall swallow him up;  
<sup>13</sup> The words of his mouth begin with foolishness,  
And the end of his talk is raving madness.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 10:16

<sup>14</sup> A fool also multiplies words.  
No man knows what is to be;  
Who can tell him what will be after him?  
<sup>15</sup> The labor of fools wearies them,  
For they do not even know how to go to the city!  
(Ecclesiastes 10:12-15)

A wise person has a mouth that speaks gracious words. Ephesians 4:29 declares, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." The Bible is not just concerned with swearing. It is concerned about words that cut others down. Be kind, be a good listener. Speak the truth in love.<sup>6</sup>

The fool speaks folly to his or her own hurt. And fools pontificate about everything thinking he or she knows it all. But in reality they are numb-skulls. In life they couldn't follow directions if a GPS gave them turn by turn directions.

There is a book titled "The Intellectuals" by Paul Johnson. He studied the philosophy of men like Rousseau, Karl Marx, Leo Tolstoy, Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard Russell. The author not only examined the teachings of these men but how they lived. Do you know what he discovered? In life these great philosophers couldn't find their butts with both hands! Their habits were ungodly. They didn't care for their spouses or children, and they were arrogant and rude. Foolishness not only harms the fool they can ruin entire communities and countries.

Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,  
And your princes feast in the morning!  
<sup>17</sup> Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles,  
And your princes feast at the proper time—  
For strength and not for drunkenness!  
(Ecclesiastes 10:16, 17)

Woe to a country whose leader acts like a kid and where those in office party before the work is done. Real leaders use their authority to build a nation, while others use public funds for their own selfish purposes. When leaders don't have the wisdom to focus on real priorities and needs or to make good, moral decisions, the people pay for it.

Because of laziness the building decays,  
And through idleness of hands the house leaks.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:18)

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<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:14, 15

What brings a house to ruin? An owner who cares for his own ease and not the upkeep of his house. What destroys a country or a company? Foolish leaders who care only for their own interests.

A feast is made for laughter,  
And wine makes merry;  
But money answers everything.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:19)

Solomon is still writing about government here. And this is ancient Hebrew sarcasm. It concerns leaders who are fools and live for pleasure. And they believe they can solve society's needs simply by raising taxes and throwing money at the problem.

Do not curse the king, even in your thought;  
Do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom;  
For a bird of the air may carry your voice,  
And a bird in flight may tell the matter.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:20)

Be careful about what you say, when you say it and to whom you say it. Both the good and the bad things you say about someone will surely get back to them.

Like Solomon Jesus Christ knew the difference between wisdom and folly. He once told a story to show the difference. He said,

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine,  
and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who  
built his house on the rock: <sup>25</sup> and the rain descended,  
the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on  
that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on  
the rock.

<sup>26</sup> "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine,  
and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who  
built his house on the sand: <sup>27</sup> and the rain descended,  
the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on  
that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."  
(Matthew 7:24-27)

Let's be wise and build our lives on the rock.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In the New Testament, the apostle Paul also writes about being wise in life. He wrote: "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, <sup>16</sup>redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

<sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord *is*."