

“Contagion”
Ecclesiastes 10:1-3
(Preached at Trinity, December 17, 2023)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Solomon is continuing to stress the great value of wisdom and the bane of foolishness. Foolishness is a curse. Great wisdom can be undermined by a little folly.
Ecclesiastes 9:18 NAU - "Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good."
Ecclesiastes 10:1 NAU - "Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom *and* honor."
2. In **Verse 1** he speaks of the presence of dead flies.
 - a. Flies are usually equated with death and decay. A fly is a mature maggot. Adult flies lay their eggs on decaying flesh which then hatch into maggots. The presence of maggots on meat is enough to turn away even the most stout of heart in revulsion.
 - b. Here we find flies that have found their way into ointment or oil. In our day ointments usually describe a cream or salve used for medicinal purposes. In earlier days, however, ointments were more likely used for cosmetic or ceremonial purposes. **Verse 1** stresses the fragrance of the oil. The ESV calls it a “perfumer’s ointment.” The NASB calls it a “perfumer’s oil.”
 - c. A dead fly in the ointment would ruin its usefulness. It transforms it from something with a pleasant aroma to something that stinks.
3. The expression “fly in the ointment” has become an idiom that has found its way into the English language.
“something that spoils a situation that could have been pleasant”
4. Solomon’s point is, while a single wise man might save a city, a single fool will bring much harm. He can undo much good.
Ecclesiastes 9:18 NAU - "one sinner destroys much good."
5. Likewise, a single dead fly can ruin an entire batch of fragrant oil. Solomon says it will stink.
In **Chapter 7** Solomon wrote of the importance of a good reputation. It’s like the fragrance of a soothing ointment.
Ecclesiastes 7:1 NAU - "A good name is better than a good ointment"
Like dead flies in the ointment, a little foolishness can ruin a good reputation.
6. It’s the small things that quickly bring us down. Small sins become great sins. A regular teaching from the NT is a little sin will increase to greater sin.
1 Corinthians 5:6 NAU - "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*?"
Galatians 5:9 NAU - "A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*."

- a. Leaven has the particular characteristic of beginning small, but it expands quickly affects the whole. A pinch is all that is necessary to leaven a whole loaf of bread. Our great desire is to bring everything under the Lordship of Christ.
- b. We must never underestimate the power of small things. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.
 - A single candle flame is said to have caused the great Chicago fire.
 - The splitting of a single atom can cause a chain reaction capable of destroying an entire city.
 - There is a well-known proverb that presses the significance of small things Benjamin Franklin quoted it in *Poor Richard's Almanack in 1758* – “For the want of a nail the shoe was lost; for the want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the rider was lost; and for want of a rider the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

I. We need to understand that foolishness is a plague.

- A. It is highly communicable
 1. It spreads easily from person to person
 2. We easily receive false information and just as easily repeat it. This is one of the dangers of social media. I heard a commercial the other day asking people to check their sources before repeating it on the internet. This shows how dangerous and pervasive it has become.
 3. How many have been harmed by lies spoken from our lips? Our gossip quickly spreads to another.
 4. Worse, how many people have been infected by our sinful actions. Sin left unchecked will lead others to buy into your falsehood. Lost family members will find comfort in their sin as you signal approval by your actions. Is it good or harmful for people to be around us?
1 Corinthians 15:33 NAU - "Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."
 5. Our words should build up and edify.
Ephesians 4:29 NAU - "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear."
 6. Our love for Christ should encourage everyone else in the church.
- B. The plague of foolishness can also show up in false doctrine.
 1. Paul warned Timothy that false doctrine can spread like a cancer
2 Timothy 2:16 – “But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness,¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,”
 - a. Gangrene is a disease by which any part of the body suffering from infection becomes so corrupted that, unless an immediate remedy is applied (often amputation), the infection spreads, attacks other parts, and at last eats away the bones”

- b. Just like a disease false doctrine can begin small but will soon grow and weaken the body – it can be gradual
Melanoma can begin with a freckle
West Nile Virus begins with the tiny prick of a mosquito.
 - 2. The results of error may endure for years – Healing can be a slow process. This is why it is so difficult to reform a church. Long after the false teachers have been removed it is difficult work to cleanse the minds of the membership of the errors that they have embraced.
 - C. It isn't difficult to tell who has been infected by the plague of foolishness.
 - 1. Often, they expose themselves as soon as they open their mouth.
Proverbs 17:28 NAU - "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is *considered* prudent."
 - 2. Their actions also give them away.
 - a. They live as if there is no God.
Psalms 14:1 NAU - "The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good."
 - b. Their life paths are characterized by foolishness. They are always heading in the wrong direction. – **Verses 2-3**
 - 3. **Verse 3** can be interpreted two different ways.
The fool demonstrates to everyone the foolishness of his heart.
It can also mean he tells everyone else that *they* are fools.
Ecclesiastes 10:3 ESV - "and he says to everyone that he is a fool."
The word for “demonstrates” in the NASB most often refers to something spoken. He tells others they are fools while overlooking his own foolishness.
Most fools condemn others while being oblivious to their own heart.

II. The Christian life demands great care and caution.

- A. **Verse 1** implies carelessness
 - 1. Perhaps the ointment was of great value. Like the oil of perfume used by Mary.
Mark 14:3 NAU - "While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining *at the table*, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; *and* she broke the vial and poured it over His head."
The perfume was “very costly” and it was carefully kept in an alabaster vial or flask. The alabaster was often carved and beautiful. It was sealed and had to be broken to pour it on the head of Jesus.
 - 2. If the ointment in **Verse 1** had been kept closed and sealed the fly would not have fallen into it.
- B. The Christian life demands careful attention.
 - 1. The NT uses words like sober and vigilance. To stay on the alert.
 - 2. Paul admonishes us to flee from even the smallest amount of evil.
1 Thessalonians 5:22 NAU - "abstain from every form of evil."

3. Solomon says the wise man always seeks to do that which is right. His heart leads him towards the right. The fool takes the opposite path.
Ecclesiastes 10:2 NAU - "A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but the foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left."
 - a. This isn't a disparaging statement against left-handedness. Rather it is pressing the importance of keeping on the right path. By saying the fool is on the left Solomon is telling us he is going the wrong direction.
 - b. It reminds us of Psalm 1
Psalm 1:1-2 KJV - "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night."
 3. Which direction are you going? Are you growing in your walk with Christ or is your heart more often divided?
 What kind of appetite do you have?
Matthew 5:6 NAU - "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."
 What are the things you desire? People will pursue their desires.
- C. Maintaining the right direction demands caution and discipline.
1. The sweetness of our communion with Christ can be soured by the dead flies of worldliness.
 2. As wise Christians we must train our senses with prayer and God's Word. Charles Bridges wrote: "Is it not when prayer and diligence are neglected, that little inconsistencies are allowed, *that* almost imperceptibly destroy the savour of holiness? How important is it to walk uprightly with God, and . . . to lay ourselves out unreservedly in his service! The *dead flies* will trouble us to the end. But a watchful self-discipline will be a cover to us."¹
 3. Christianity is a matter of the heart, of inward realities that manifest themselves outwardly.
 - a. Notice Solomon's emphasis upon the heart.
Ecclesiastes 10:2 NAU - "A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but the foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left."
 - b. Jesus stressed the importance of the heart.
Matthew 15:19 NAU - "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders."

¹ Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 290.

- c. Christianity isn't just an outward show of piety. It is an inward change of heart.
1 Peter 3:3-4 NAU - "Your adornment must not be *merely* external-- braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; ⁴ but *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God."
4. The wise man keeps his eye upon the condition of his heart. His actions proceed from within.
- a. Philip Ryken – "Everything in life follows the heart. The wise man goes the right way because his heart leans the right way, but the wicked man's heart leans in the opposite direction, which is where he ends up going. Wisdom and folly are inclinations of the heart. . . The leaning of the heart determines the direction of the life."²
- b. The fool is led astray by his corrupt heart.
Ecclesiastes 10:3 NAU - "Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone *that* he is a fool." (The word for "sense" is the same word translated heart in **Verse 2**)
 He doesn't know where he's going although he is too dull of heart to know it.

Conclusion:

1. Wisdom and foolishness are often equated with good and evil. Solomon sometimes does this.
Ecclesiastes 7:17 NAU - "Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool."
2. But foolishness and wickedness are not always the same thing. Even the righteous man can become foolish with regard to his spiritual life. He can fall into spiritual neglect. He can squander God's gracious means for growing spiritually.
3. We are admonished to give careful attention to how we live before our Savior. This is the wise behavior of the righteous man.
Ephesians 5:15-17 NAU - "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of your time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 233.