

Hope PCA Sermon: August 4, 2024

“Proverbs about the Foolish” (Ecclesiastes 10:1–20)

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It’s been a while since we were in Ecclesiastes, so I thought we’d take a look at it this morning. We’ll consider all of chapter 10, which means there’s only two chapters left. We may actually finish this possibly by the end of the year. That would be nice. A challenging book, but I think hopefully helpful for us and for our walk with our God. So, Ecclesiastes chapter 10 this morning. If you would please stand if you’re able, in honor of the reading of God’s Word. Ecclesiastes 10 verses 1 through 20. Through his servant the preacher, the Lord God, gives us these words.

*1 Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a stench;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

*2 A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right,
but a fool’s heart to the left.*

*3 Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense,
and he says to everyone that he is a fool.*

*4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place,
for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.*

*5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from
the ruler: ⁶folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. ⁷I have seen
slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.*

*8 He who digs a pit will fall into it,
and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.*

*9 He who quarries stones is hurt by them,
and he who splits logs is endangered by them.*

*10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge,
he must use more strength,
but wisdom helps one to succeed.*

*11 If the serpent bites before it is charmed,
there is no advantage to the charmer.*

*12 The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him.*

*13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness,
and the end of his talk is evil madness.*

*14 A fool multiplies words,
though no man knows what is to be,
and who can tell him what will be after him?*

*15 The toil of a fool wearies him,
for he does not know the way to the city.*

- 16 *Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,
and your princes feast in the morning!*
- 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!*
- 18 *Through sloth the roof sinks in,
and through indolence the house leaks.*
- 19 *Bread is made for laughter,
and wine gladdens life,
and money answers everything.*
- 20 *Even in your thoughts, 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.*

An interesting set of wise sayings for us from Ecclesiastes chapter 10. Let me (please be seated first) and then let me pray for us as we come to the Word.

Oh God, our Father, this is your Word. Speak it to us this morning, even through a frail human vessel. For you've made a promise that your Word goes out and does not return to you empty, but accomplishes everything you purpose for it. We trust, O Lord, that that will be true here this morning. May your Word go out and be successful. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

There are many ways to call out someone as a fool or being foolish. Now, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:22 reminds us that we can go too far in doing this and be in danger of God's judgment. We can be condescending. Don't be a fool. Maybe we're trying to alert someone. Don't be a fool. Maybe we're at our wit's end pleading with them. Please, don't be a fool. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you know — you know, without doubt — maybe from experience or just observing life under the sun, maybe a friend or a family member is about to do something that they shouldn't do, something very, very foolish. Ever been in that situation? What do you say? How do you get their attention? Again, sometimes people are smug or condescending. In that kind of response, it's clear that we're seeing the other person as inferior and about to do something so foolish that the superiority over them that we feel comes out in our expression. "I know better. I'm smarter than they are." And we put the other person down in the words that we use. "Come on, don't be a fool." This is probably what Matthew 5:22 has in view.

But sometimes it's a quick reaction, an attempt to get their attention. We're afraid maybe their action is rash and sudden and we want to, or even need to, get their attention. Think of a parent watching a child run out into a road where there's heavy traffic. "Don't be a fool. How many times do I have to tell you? Don't do it. Come back." It's a warning. Or again, sometimes as you're working with someone, counseling them, trying to help them through a situation, you've tried this, you've tried that, you've said this, you've said that, no progress is being made, and it feels like all that there's left to do is just to plead with them. "Please, please, please don't do this. Don't be foolish." And it's not just other people. Foolishness comes at us.

It comes at us in a number of ways. It comes from our own selves, for we indeed are foolish people, more often than we like to admit. But also people we love around us are foolish.

Now the preacher has known folly, and he's told us about it in various places through this book. The fool, he says, walks in darkness, a metaphor for being spiritually or morally blind. Chapter 2 verse 14. We saw a little bit of it in this passage, but he also says in chapter 4 verse 5 that the fool is lazy. Laziness seems to be a characteristic quality of folly. In chapter 7 verse 9, a fool is quick to get angry. Again, in this passage we heard about the wise one who is calm. In chapter 9, the fool shouts out his folly. And this is contrasted to the words of the wise that are spoken in quiet. In fact, there's this very simple statement in chapter 5 verse 4. God is not pleased with fools. Now up until this chapter, as we approached it, the preacher's been telling us some general truths about life under the sun. End of chapter 7, he seeks wisdom and finds instead the pervasiveness and sinfulness of sin. And that very memorable phrase, "Men have sought out many schemes." We're schemers in our sin. Chapter 8 verses 1-9, he's looking for wisdom in the realm of government, and what he finds instead is the reality that man has power over man to his hurt, and this is unjust. And in the following verses, 10-17 of chapter 8, he tells us about the injustice of life, and calls us instead to just be thankful for what God has given to us. Enjoy what life you have. The first half of chapter 9 is a contrast of two very fundamental realities. God is the one who has power, not man. And at the same time, death comes to every man. And his response, which is a theme in these chapters, enjoy what life you have. Death comes to everybody. Be thankful for the gifts that you've been given. The second half, again, similar. He's looking for wisdom, but life is so very uncertain that he turns to wisdom to be able to enjoy what is good, what life we have here under the sun. Wisdom and folly being contrasted, I think, very sharply in these chapters that lead up to chapter 10.

Now we get to chapter 10, and it's basically a series of Proverbs. of wisdom sayings, and they warn about folly. And the preacher is calling out to us, "Don't be a fool, do not be a fool." And he's showing us the consequences of folly in this life we live under the sun. There's no real outline or logical flow from one point to another in chapter 10, just again like a collection of proverbs. Some similar themes that people seem to recognize, and I'll try to follow those this morning and draw some conclusions along the way.

So here's these groups that people see in chapter 10 of these wisdom sayings.

Verse 1 is about the destructiveness of folly, and that sets the theme for the rest of the chapter.

Verses 2 and 3, where does folly come from?

Verses 4-7, foolishness among those who rule. Another familiar theme.

Verses 8-11, what does folly look like in action?

And more specifically in verses 12-14, foolish talk.

Verse 15, the folly of work.

And then 16 to 20, the folly of life in general.

We'll work through these in turn this morning.

Verse 1 is very striking in its imagery. We had a pastor years ago when he wanted to illustrate the sinfulness of sin. I probably used this illustration before. Sure, I have. He says, "Imagine you've got a septic tank in your yard that's full of waste, and you take some of the finest wine that you have and you pour two, three, four, five bottles of the best, finest wine into that tank.

Are you going to drink it now? No, you're not. It's disgusting. It's still raw sewage. No matter what we do, we can't do enough good to turn sin from something other than sin. You can't do enough to outweigh it." And he illustrated that by taking the opposite extreme. "Imagine you've got a bottle of that fine, wonderful, probably expensive wine, and you get a little dropper of that raw sewage. You go to that bottle of wine and you just put one drop into that bottle of wine. You gonna drink that now? Any takers? No. No. It's gross. It's disgusting. Sin does that to us. The smallest bit of sin pollutes the whole. And we can pour all of our good works into it and not make it any better."

The preacher is using a similar illustration here in verse 1. A perfumer ("apothecary" is the word used, I think, in the King James), a perfumer is working away in his shop, extracting ointment from a plant or some other source, and while he's doing it, what happens? A fly gets into the ointment and dies and stinks up the ointment. It's no good. It's got to be thrown out. Ruins the whole batch. This, says the preacher, is folly. Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench. That's a little bit of folly. In the same way, *"a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor."* A little folly can undo a great deal of wisdom and honor. There might be a fool who gains power, a Hitler, a Lenin, one of these other foolish dictators that we see around the world. There might be one person in a committee or a group of advisors in a country or a business, even in a church, whose words, for whatever reason, no matter how foolish they are, are nevertheless heeded and followed to the great destruction of all. A little folly outweighs a great deal of honor and wisdom. And so this verse really is kind of a foundation for the rest of the chapter. It just takes a little bit of foolishness to ruin everything. So are to be on our guard.

Where does foolishness, where does folly come from? Verses 2 and 3 tell us that folly is a matter of the heart. A fool's heart inclines *"to the left"* opposite of a wise person's heart who inclines *"to the right"*. Now this is not about people who are left-handed, and it's not about politics. And I say that because I know some of you went there. It's not about politics, left-wing or right-wing. It just has to do with the way the world looked at things in those days. The right hand was, for most people, the strong hand. And so the right hand is associated with strength and with what is good. The right hand was used to bless. Think of the patriarchs in the Old Testament, Jacob putting his right hand on Joseph's sons. The right hand is the place of authority. Jesus ascends to where? To the right hand of the Father. In the judgment, sheep are on the right, goats are on the left. What the preacher is telling us is that the fool's heart leads him in a direction that's not good, not of strength, not a blessing.

And the fool's heart here isn't about just emotions like we think of our hearts today. Biblically, the heart is the seed of understanding and of knowledge as well as emotions. Therefore, for the fool, his heart inclining *"to the left"* is a description of his whole being, his whole life, his whole understanding. It's just off-kilter. It's going in the wrong direction. Psalm 14 verse 1 summarizes it this way, "The fool says in his heart, there is no God." The fool's heart is way off, way off kilter. He denies the existence of God and therefore the authority of God in his life. That's dangerous. We'll be talking a similar theme tonight in the evening worship service, the danger of turning against God, denying Him.

But this is all consistent with the preacher's point of view in this book so far. Life under the sun is folly, it's vanity, it's emptiness, it's futility. But he's also shown us that life under heaven is good because there's a God in heaven and he rules from heaven and he gives order to the times and season and purposes to them. And so we truly can have joy and contentment in this life that God has given to us. And so the wise man, implied here, the wise person acknowledges God. That's turning "*to the right*". And I think the preacher's setting up a question for us to ask ourselves throughout this whole chapter. Who am I? Am I wise or am I a fool? How do I think of God? How do I think of my relationship with him?

Verse 3 goes on to illustrate this by showing us that a fool shows everyone that he's a fool by how he lives, this "walking down the road". As we've seen in other places, walking is a metaphor for living life. "Walk in a manner worthy of your calling." Going in and out, living life. The way the fool lives his life out there in the open "*on the road*" shows to everyone that he's a fool. Again, what kind of life are you and I showing to those around us? What are those look at us and say, "Well, there goes a fool." Or they look at us and say, "There goes someone who is wise." Just our very conduct reveals this to those around us. So we should consider our actions and what they say about our relative wisdom or quality, the strength or weakness of those. I wanted to spend some time on those first three verses because they really set up everything else in this chapter so we can move a little bit more quickly through them.

Verses 4-7, the preacher again looks at those who rule, those who govern. Phil Reyken in his commentary on Ecclesiastes refers to a quote that's often attributed to Mark Twain. Supposedly Mark Twain said this at some point: "Suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were a member of Congress, but I repeat myself..." Mark Twain had wit. The preacher sees an evil "*under the sun*", folly in "*high places*" that results on the slaves riding on the horse and the master, the prince, walking on the ground as if he was a slave. Folly has a way of turning things upside down, of making things the very opposite of the way they should be. Think of "The Prince and the Pauper", that story by Mark Twain. The pauper who gets made a prince just because he looks like him. Or one of my favorites, if you haven't seen this old movie, watch it, do yourself a favor. Danny Kaye and "The Court Jester": "The vessel with the pestle has the pellet with the poison. The flagon with the dragon has the brew that is true."

That's just a taste. Fools who occupy places of power. It's just wrong. It's destructive. England went through this with King George and his periods of insanity brought about because of his physical infirmities. Or think of the Peter Principle, that idea that we rise to our level of incompetence and higher. A foolish person who keeps rising up and up and up in the hierarchy until he or she finally demonstrates incompetence.

What do you do in that kind of a situation? And the preacher has a very simple piece of advice: be calm. Be calm. "*Calmness will lay great offenses to rest.*" Getting exercised about it isn't going to fix things. They have the power. You don't. If you do have the power, then you can do something about it. For 99.9% of us, be calm.

Verses 8 to 11 describe falling in action. It's destructive when it's found in those who have authority over others, but it's also destructive in action, because fools are foolish. They're stupid. They're dumb, to be blunt. And he gives illustrations of it. A fool digs a trap, maybe for

an animal or maybe for another person, and falls into it himself. A fool tries to break into a house and a serpent hiding in a wall bites him. The fool is not paying attention and he suffers the result. Again in verse 9, the fool isn't careful, working dangerous occupations, coring stone or splitting logs. Ancient jobs that are parallels to, you know, "Deadliest Catch" or the "Ice Road Truckers" or "Dirty Jobs" — those kinds of things. If you have that kind of a job, and you're not paying attention, you can very easily get hurt, and suffer a great deal of hurt. And fools are fools, and so they are likely to get hurt. Fools don't sharpen their tools, and so they end up working harder. You've got to keep pounding on that dull piece of iron. "Work smarter, not harder" is not just a 20th century management proverb. It's there in Ecclesiastes. Fools don't prepare adequately. That's the example of the snake charmer in verse 11. They had them all the way back in Solomon's time, 3,000 years ago. If you're going to charm a snake, you better charm it. Otherwise, you'll get bitten. Don't fool around and let the snake bite you. Don't be snake-bitten. We still use that kind of terminology today. Fools don't prepare. They're rash in their actions. They don't think things through. They don't pay attention to what they're doing, and they suffer the result of their very own foolish actions.

And preacher moves in verses 12 to 14 to speech. Fools say foolish (again, if I could be blunt), stupid things. A fool's speech, he says, "*consumes him*" rather than wins him favor. Again, you can tell a fool by how he talks and what he talks about. The preacher says there's a "*madness*" there, an "*evil*" about it. A fool goes on and on with certainty and with utter conviction about topics, where any wise person knows that just the opposite is true, and the fool keeps prattling on about it and doesn't stop. Or at least the wise know that we don't know the answer for sure. Another way to think of it: a fool is a know-it-all. And the loud talking of a fool proclaims to those around him that he really doesn't have a clue. There's an old saying, "It's better to be quiet and let others think I'm a fool than open my mouth and prove it." There's a time for talking and there's a time for not talking. And the simplest application of that, the time for not talking is when you don't know what you're talking about.

Verse 15, folly in the workplace. "*The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.*" An interesting little proverb. A fool gets tired working. That phrase, "*doesn't know the way to the city*", is probably just maybe an old-world metaphor for the general idea that a fool doesn't know where he's going or why. Doesn't know the goal of the work. And so a fool toils and toils and toils and doesn't make progress. Works harder than necessary because he doesn't know what he's doing or where he's going.

And then ending the chapter in verses 16 to 20, folly in life in general. First thing he talks about again is leadership. You need someone mature to lead. It's not about age, it's about maturity. Solomon considered himself a child and asked for wisdom, even though by age he was an adult. His son Rehoboam was an adult but acted like a child and was a fool, terribly immature. A good, wise ruler knows the proper time and the proper way to do things. Feasting is not for gluttony or partying. It's contrasted with feasting that is for gathering strength, so as to be able to fight and protect the nation. Sloth in general leads to destruction because necessary vital parts of life are not kept up and protected, and so they vanish. A roof falls apart, things leak, things break down. He goes on to say that it's folly to curse the king or the ruler of a nation because your words might get back to him. You don't know what little bird might carry your words to the ear of the king. And those in power will take it out on you

for cursing them. Better, he says in verse 19, is bread and wine. Bread *“for laughter”*, wine that *“gladdens life”*. He even says *“money answers everything”*. Again, that’s probably not literal. This is wisdom literature. It’s meant for general instruction. And it probably just means, in general, more money does make life more easy, if you have it.

These verses seem to focus on individuals, but it’s true for groups of people as well, societies. Societies need good rulers. Good societies are industrious, cautious, circumspect in speech to others and with one another. Good societies are thankful for what they have and enjoy what they have. So nations can be foolish too. And let’s be honest, what do we see in our nation right now? Wisdom? Or falling? The answer is, unfortunately, painfully obvious.

So do we conclude from all this? Well, the first is quite simple. Don’t be a fool. Don’t be a fool. Folly is destructive. Firstly, it is self-destructive. But it’s also destructive to those around us and to society in general. And it doesn’t take a lot. Remember verse 1: a dead fly in the ointment makes it stink. A little folly, a little inattentiveness, and a snake will bite you, or you’ll fall into your own pit, or your roof will leak when it starts to rain. A foolish leader is destructive to his organization or to his country. Don’t be a fool. This is the Bible’s constant call to us.

But the second thing to remember is that folly is a matter of the heart. A wise man fears God. A foolish man denies God. So actually this chapter ends in a similar place to where chapter 9 ended last time: seek wisdom. Seek wisdom and don’t be a fool. Chapter 9 verse 18: “Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.” Chapter 10 is basically an illustration of that last verse of chapter 9. One sinner destroys much good.

Well, what does wisdom pursue? Remember the goal of this book. Ecclesiastes is like John’s Gospel. You need to read the end and then go back to the beginning and read the rest of the book in light of what you read at the end. This is when it’s okay to read the end of the book. You don’t have to wait till you get there. John’s Gospel tells us “These things were written so that we may know that Jesus is the Christ and have life as we believe in Him.” The preacher tells us at the end of this book, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” How do we pursue wisdom? What does wisdom pursue? Wisdom pursues God. Fear God and keep His commandments. Proverbs tells us that’s the beginning of wisdom.

And if God and the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, where does that lead? Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians, especially chapter 1, but also going into the second chapter. He writes there that he “resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” And he makes a very pointed contrast to the Jews and the Greeks. The miracles sought by Jews and the wisdom sought by Greeks. And he does this because in the end (this is in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 24), Christ is both “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” You want wisdom? It can only be found in Jesus Christ through faith in him. Christ is wisdom. Christ is wisdom incarnate in the flesh. Again, who is a fool? The fool is the one who “says in his heart that there is no God.” The one who rejects salvation that can only come in and through Christ Jesus. You want to be wise? Open your eyes. Recognize your sin. Admit it, confess it to God, and seek the forgiveness that he freely offers in his Son. Free! You don’t have to pay for it, you

don't have to work for it, you don't have to earn it. Only a fool would reject that. Friends, hear the preacher. Don't be a fool.

Let me pray for us.

Lord God and Father, indeed, without you, without the wisdom that you grant, we are fools. Sin is folly. Sin is illogical. Sin is destructive. The very same things we hear about folly and foolishness. Help us to recognize our foolishness. Help us to recognize the sin that is so fully entwined with that foolishness. Help us to admit it and seek the forgiveness that you give in and through your precious Son. Without you, again, O Lord, we could not be wise. Do not let us be wise in our own eyes. But help us, O Lord, to be wise according to your Word, coming to you in repentance and faith. Work these things in us, O Lord, by the power of your Spirit, as the good news of the gospel goes out to a world that is walking in darkness and death and utter foolishness. And may we be instruments of bringing that good news of life and wisdom. We pray it in Christ's name. Amen.

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