

Book: Ecclesiastes
Series: *Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God*
Lesson 14: *Wisdom about Folly*
Text: Ecclesiastes 10:1-20
Date: Sunday, May 5, 2013

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

Book: Ecclesiastes
Series: *Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God*
Lesson 14: *Wisdom about Folly*
Text: Ecclesiastes 10:1-20
Date: Sunday, May 5, 2013
Next Lesson: Ecclesiastes 11:1-10



TEACHING TIP

Consider where we've been so far:

Two ways to live:

1. ***"Under the Sun"—the futility of this is seen in:***
 - a. *The Ceaseless Cycle of Existence (1:1-11)*
 - b. *The Emptiness of Pleasure (2:1-11)*
 - c. *The Limitations of Wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)*
 - d. *The Frustrations of Labor (2:18-26)*
 - e. *The Elusiveness of Life (3:1-15)*
 - f. *The Bitterness of Misfortune (3:16-4:16)*
 - g. *The Disappointment of Wealth (5:8-20)*
 - h. *The Dissatisfaction of Humanness (6:1-12)*
2. ***"In the Fear of God"—fear-filled faith provides:***
 - a. *Wisdom for Worship (5:1-7)*
 - b. *Wisdom for Living: Operating in Life (7:1-14)*
 - c. *Wisdom for Living: Outlook on Life (7:15-29)*
 - d. *Wisdom for Citizens (8:1-17)*
 - e. *Wisdom about Death (9:1-18)*
 - f. *Wisdom about Folly (10:1-20)*

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: If you were sick and I placed a glass of orange juice in front of you, you'd probably drink it in a heartbeat. Sickness is bad, and orange juice helps alleviate and heal the sickness. However, if I put just one drop of arsenic in it, you'd most certainly not drink it. It doesn't matter how much orange juice is in that glass, and how helpful it may be, it's been completely undermined now by the arsenic.

That is the very picture that our text today is painting. Notice in verse 1, that similarly to our illustration, "Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor" (v. 1 ESV). That last phrase provides the theme for this chapter. No matter how good a situation may be, it can be threatened in a moment by the introduction of folly.¹

This passage doesn't play any games with the fool. It unmasks him for all to see the destitution and destruction that his life represents. Verses 2-3 say:

A wise man's heart is at his right hand [meaning that it inclines him to the right], but a fool's heart at his left [meaning that it inclines him to the left, astray]. Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith [meaning, "shows"] to every one that he is a fool.

Everyone can spot a fool, but whereas the book of Proverbs describes in great detail the wayward (i.e., "left")² characteristics of foolishness (and wisdom), Ecclesiastes 10 describes its effects. In other words, this passage doesn't describe what foolishness is as much as it describes what foolishness does.

Put simply, "folly" refers to behaviors and ideas that lack insight, prudence, and understanding (1:17; 2:3, 12f; 7:25; 10:1, 13).³ This way of living, like a drop of arsenic or a few dead flies, can bring terrible harm. While we know that, for those who are living "in the fear of God," there is always forgiveness, fresh mercies, and second chances, it still doesn't negate the fact that folly can have tremendous consequences. Therefore, **because folly worsens the**

frustrations of life, we must avoid it. In Ecclesiastes 10, Solomon surveys three spheres of life that are negatively affected by folly.

FOLLY AFFECTS ONE'S LEADERSHIP (vv. 4-7, 16-20).

Illustration: Lyndon B. Johnson said, "A president's hardest task is not to *do* what's right, but to *know* what's right." Indeed, that is where many leaders fail. Foolish leaders have a skewed or incomplete picture of right and wrong, and their folly adversely affects their leadership in at least three areas.

1. **Folly taints a leader's appreciation (vv. 4, 20).**

Read vv. 4, 20.


First, a leader's folly will provoke the anger of his subordinates (v. 4). In verse 4, we read of the anger of a ruler inciting the anger of a staff member (i.e., "place" = "position" or "post" in 1 Kings 20:24; Ecclesiastes 8:3). While this could refer to a scenario in which a staff member made a grave mistake, thus provoking the appropriate anger of his leader, the context of the passage (i.e., both the emphasis on a ruler's folly, and the call for "calmness" in the second half of this verse) seems to indicate that the ruler's anger is due to his own selfishness and foolishness. In that kind of a situation, it is normal for the exasperated subordinate to himself fly off the handle. That authority's subjects no longer appreciate and respect him, for his foolishness has undermined their trust.


Second, a leader's folly will provoke the slander of his subordinates (v. 20). In verse 20, having just decried lazy, irresponsible authority, Solomon admonishes his students to be careful to "curse not the king." Why would he write that? It is because a natural response toward those in authority over us who are foolishly negligent and incompetent is to belittle, disparage, and slander them. Those who rule in folly will reap the depreciatory frustration of their subjects.

Before we leave this point, we must notice that Solomon actually gives a word of caution to those very subjects who find themselves losing any appreciation for their rulers. He actually warns them that to respond in anger (v. 4) or slander (v. 20) is itself a dangerous response of folly.

Whereas the subject's anger may seem justifiable (v. 4), it will further intensify the punitive wrath of the king (8:3-5). Kidner keenly comments, "What we are invited to notice is that rather absurd human phenomenon, the huff." Many are the stories of subordinates (understandably) losing their cool (i.e., "the huff") only to discover that their leader then provides them with the simultaneous loss of job, income, respect, and maybe even life. Thus, we are instructed to control our spirit, be slow to anger, maintain faithfulness in our duties, and practice "calmness" (cf. Proverbs 14:30; 15:[1], 4; [16:14, 32]; [25:15])—NKJV "conciliation," NET "calm response," NIV/ESV/HCSB "calmness," NASB "composure"). Such a response will "pacify great offenses"⁴ and is an expression of wisdom.

Again, in verse 20, while a subject's pejorative speech may seem justifiable, it often has a way of getting back to the ruler. And undoubtedly, the incompetent king will not learn from such criticism, but will swiftly stamp it out. Thus, in wisdom hold your tongue and submit yourself under your leaders (cf. 8:2-3; Proverbs 14:35; 24:21-22).

 **Application:** What does the subordinate have to sacrifice in order to avoid these foolish responses of anger and slander? *His rights and his "rightness" (i.e., "But I'm right and you're wrong!"). Sometimes, wisdom allows you to think something, but advises that you not say it; the consequences of verbalizing it may be worse than just silently bearing up under the mistreatment.*


 What does the subordinate gain by avoiding these foolish responses of anger and slander? *Safety, peace, etc.*

2. **Folly taints a leader's appointments (vv. 5-7).**

Read vv. 5-7.

The great Student/Teacher Solomon has "seen" another "evil [or misfortune]...under the sun," "an error which proceedeth from the ruler"—he knows that it's not supposed to be this way; he knows that it's not fair; but he has come to recognize that often this is what life is like "under the sun."

This "evil error" is described in verses 6-7, and it is the frequent problem of inept and incompetent leadership accompanied by the lack of opportunity and appointment for those who are capable.⁵ The God-fearing mind of wisdom recognizes that the wise should be in positions of leadership, and "folly" should reap its consequences in lowliness and service. Contrariwise, however, foolish leaders reproduce themselves in their appointments, whether by ignorance or caprice, and it is an "evil error."

 **Application:** In the ultimate sense, how has God solves this problem of foolish leadership appointments? *He has appointed one who will be a perfect King (Isaiah 9; Revelation 21-22)!*

3. **Folly taints a leader's activities (vv. 16-19).**


Read vv. 16-19.


In these verses, Solomon bemoans (lit. "Alas!" or "Pity!" or "Sorrow!") a land that is governed by foolish leaders and extols (lit. "Blessed!") a land governed by wise leaders. These kinds of leaders are distinguishable in their activities.

Foolish leaders are "childish" (v. 16). When this word is used of rulers, it depicts incompetence, naivety, inexperience, and immaturity (cf. 1 Kings 3:7; Isaiah 3:4, 9), in contrast to the discernment (i.e., "in due season," 3:1;

8:5), self-control (i.e., “in strength”), and sobriety (i.e., “not in drunkenness”) of wise rulers (v. 17). Opposite those who are “sons of nobles” (v. 17), these foolish leaders have had an improper upbringing with little training on discernment and decorum. Thus, they “eat [or feast] in the morning” (v. 16) without any of the restraint commended in verse 17. Their “slothfulness” (i.e., laziness) and “idleness” is destructive (v. 18), and their whole leadership philosophy is self-centered and hedonistic (v. 19; cf. 2:2; 7:3, 6), devoid of the gravity and responsibility that must accompany leadership.

Illustration: “Woodrow Wilson wrote, ‘A friend of mine says that every man who takes office in Washington either grows or swells; when I give a man an office, I watch him carefully to see whether he is swelling or growing.’”⁶ It is the fool that swells, arrogantly and lazily taking his position for granted and using it to satisfy his own lusts.

 **Application:** What areas of your leadership are tainted by folly? *open discussion*

 What can you do to overcome these byproducts of folly—the disrespect of your subordinates, poor leadership appointments, and incompetent or indolent management? *open discussion*

Transition: We must avoid folly, for it only worsens the frustrations of life. This is seen first in the area of leadership; secondly, it is evident in one’s labor.

FOLLY AFFECTS ONE’S LABOR (vv. 8-11).

Read vv. 8-11.

Two points of reality of balanced in these verses.

1. **Wisdom doesn’t guarantee success (vv. 8-9).**

While the KJV translates the four imperfect verbs in these verses as indicative (i.e., “will”),⁷ it’s better to take them in a modal sense (i.e., “may”; cf. NASB, NIV, HCSB, NET). With this adjustment made, it becomes apparent that Solomon is again warning against an over-dependence upon wisdom to navigate through life (cf. 1:15, 17; 2:15, 17; 7:15-16, 23-24; 8:14, 16-17).

[1] The one who digs a pit may fall into it [cf. Psalm 7:15], and [2] the one who breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake [cf. Amos 5:19]. [3] The one who quarries stones may be hurt by them; [4] the one who splits trees may be endangered by them. (HCSB)

So, don’t depend on your wisdom to navigate life’s misfortunes and avoid all the pitfalls. Life is full of “evils” and “vanity,” and it’s twists and turns are in the hand of God (3:1-11, 14-15; 7:13-15; cf. Lesson 11).


2. **Folly can impede success (vv. 10-11).**


As he has done throughout the book, Solomon balances that somewhat-disappointing reality with another point—however incomplete wisdom may be, it is still incalculably better than folly (2:12-14; 7:12, 17; 9:18).


In this passage, he quickly explains that with two illustrations. First, if a workman fails to “whet [or sharpen] the edge” of his “iron” axe, he is forced “to put more strength” or effort into his labor (v. 10).⁸ He would be wise to just take the time to sharpen the blade, thus saving himself the time and energy and enhancing his efficiency in cutting up the wood.

Second, if a snake charmer (i.e., “babblers,” KJV) has not fully charmed or “enchanted” the “serpent,” then it will “bite” and the charmer will be “no better [off]” (lit. “has no profit/advantage”) (v. 11). A wise snake charmer will be sure that the snake has been fully “enchanted.”

Thus, Solomon concludes that “wisdom is profitable to direct” (v. 10b). The (lit.) “advantage” (cf. 1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:15) of wisdom (in contrast to the lack of “advantage” for the foolish snake charmer in verse 11) is that it can bring (lit.) “success” (NKJV, NASB, ESV, NIV, HCSB, NET) (cf. 2:13; 7:12).

 **Application:** How have you witnessed the (minor or major) consequences of folly in the workplace? *open discussion*

 How have you witnessed the (minor or major) consequences of wisdom in the workplace? *open discussion*

 What are some simple steps that you can take to replace folly with wisdom in your own personal labor? *open discussion*

Transition: Folly must be avoided, because it only ever brings harm. We’ve seen its inhibiting effects on the leader and the laborer. Thirdly, folly affects one’s language.

FOLLY AFFECTS ONE’S LANGUAGE (vv. 12-15).

These verses address the language of the fool, as his speech is brought under the microscope. We discover that this foolish man’s character is revealed in his foolish conversation, for words are the window of the heart (cf. Matthew 12:34; Mark 7:21-23; Luke 6:45).

Illustration: One commentator notes, “The fool’s great publicity agent is his own tongue.”⁹ That’s the biblical affirmation as well, for Solomon wrote in Proverbs 17:28, “Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise; and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.” Building off that, Abraham

Lincoln observed, “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak out and remove all doubt.”


Thus, the wise man is counseled to guard his heart, so that his words may radiate wisdom (Proverbs 14:23). Without such guarding, folly will inevitably dictate one’s speech, producing only more folly. Such is the language of the fool, and it’s described in detail in verses 12-15.

Read vv. 12-15.

1. **Foolish speech produces isolation and destruction (v. 12).**

In typical Hebrew antithetical parallelism Solomon contrast “the words of a wise man’s mouth” with “the lips of a fool.” On the one hand, a wise man’s speech is “gracious.” This certainly means that his words will be “kindly, appropriate, helpful and attractive,”¹⁰ and it probably further suggests that it will “win him favor” among people (cf. the use of this word in Proverbs 3:4, 34; [10:32]; 13:15; 22:1, 11; 28:23; Ecclesiastes 9:11).

On the other hand, a foolish man’s speech “will swallow himself up” (cf. Proverbs 13:3; 21:23). The idea is that his words cause the “damaging [of] his reputation (see v. 3) and the possibility of his doing good.”¹¹ The Hebrew employs wordplay between this word and its root. The root can mean “to speak eloquently,” but here means “to swallow or engulf.” Thus, the fool is described—rather than using his words to bring healing and create friendships, the fool’s speech isolates himself from others and initiates his own destruction.¹²

 **Illustration:** How have you seen either part of this proverb played out in life? *open discussion*

Application: Are you a fool?

- Does your speech draw others (particularly others who are wise) toward you or away from you?
- Are you constantly wishing you hadn't said something or dealing with the consequences of something you said?

2. ***Foolish speech reveals insolence and depravity (v. 13).***

As we mentioned before, foolish speech is the offspring of a foolish heart. Verse 13 puts it this way, "The beginning [or origin or source] of the words of his mouth is foolishness." Thus, "the end [or outcome] of his talk is mischievous [lit. evil or wicked] madness" (cf. Proverbs 10:19), an "irrationality that is morally perverse."¹³ Thus, from start to finish, in his heart and in his lips, the foolish man reveals insolence and depravity.

Application: Are you a fool?

- What does your speech indicate about your heart and character?
- Is your conversation laced with questionable or corrupt content?
- Are you always talking just to fill the silence?

3. ***Foolish speech masks ignorance and distress (vv. 14-15).***

Verse 14a demonstrates that the fool never learns; he never observes the destruction that he is revealing and reaping and redirects himself. Instead, "A fool also is full of words" (v. 14a). Literally, he "multiplies" or "increases" words; he "keeps on babbling" (NET, cf. 5:3; 6:11).

The foolish talker brashly fails to recognize or admit that "a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?" (v. 14b). This has been a regular theme for Solomon (3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 9:12), but the fool has declined to learn it. Therefore, foolishly refusing to accept

ignorance, he ironically finds ignorance firmly in his grasp.¹⁴ According to verse 15, he is completely directionless and purposeless, "wearied" in his labor and not even "knowing how to go to the city."¹⁵

Application: Are you a fool?

- Do you make bold predictions and speak with conviction about issues that you know little about and have spent little time thinking through?
- Are you quicker to listen and learn or to speak and inform?
- Are you confused, distressed, and exhausted about things? Are you aimless and directionless? Are you masking all that with a speech that suggests confidence, knowledge, and insight?

CONCLUSION

Like a drop of arsenic or a few dead flies, the consequences of folly can be farther reaching than we could expect. Therefore, because folly worsens the frustrations of life, we must avoid it. Is your leadership, labor, or language being harmed by folly? Then confess your foolishness to God, ask Him for the wisdom that He gives (James 1:5; 3:13-18), diligently seek for the wisdom of God's Word (Proverbs 2:1-11), put on the character of Christ who is wisdom (Colossians 2:3), and, still dependently taking each day from the hand of an omniscient God, enjoy the success that wisdom provides (v. 10).

ENDNOTES

¹ “Folly (*sekel*) or a fool (*sākāl*) is associated with wickedness (7:17) and is the opposite of wisdom (2:19). It results from an inner deficiency of the personality (v. 2) which becomes obvious to observers (v. 3), especially in the fool’s speech (v. 14). Elsewhere the foolish are said to be ‘skilled in doing evil’ (Jer. 4:22) and to be characterized by moral insensitivity (cf. Jer. 5:21). It is a moral rather than an intellectual complaint” (Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983], 151).

² “The phrase ‘right hand’ is a Hebrew idiom for the place of protection (e.g., Pss 16:8; 110:5; 121:5). In ancient warfare, the shield of the warrior on one’s right-hand side protected one’s right hand” (NET Bible note #5 in verse 2). Elsewhere in Scripture, “right” describes obedience and “left” describes disobedience (cf. Matthew 25:31-46)

³ Cf. NET Bible and DBL.

⁴ In the Hebrew, there is a wordplay in that both “do not leave” and “yielding” share the same root. The NET Bible notes explain the significance of this wordplay: “Rather than resigning (i.e., leaving), composure can appease a king (i.e., cause the anger of the king to leave)” (NET Bible note #16 in verse 4).

⁵ Solomon’s surprise at “rich” people sitting “in low places” does not suggest any kind of prosperity teaching. The ESV Study Bible notes explain: “He is aware that the poor can also possess wisdom (4:13–14; 9:15–16) and that those from the wealthy ruling classes are not immune to corruption (5:8–12; 10:16–17; cf. Luke 6:24; James 2:6; 5:1). Nevertheless, the Bible [especially the wisdom literature, which teach general maxims] often associates wealth with prudent, godly living (Prov. 10:4) and poverty with foolishness (Prov. 6:11; 13:18); moreover, the wealth of the nobleman affords him greater opportunity to pursue learning and wisdom. Thus, the Preacher is surprised by the situation described here” (Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008], 1207).

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 19.

⁷ Indeed, some prefer the indicative translation and see in these two verses 4 illustrations of the consequences of foolishness in the workplace. Warren Wiersbe, representing this group, writes (Ibid.):

Students are not agreed on what Solomon’s point is in this graphic section. Was he saying that every job has its occupational hazards? If so, what lesson was he teaching, and why did he take so much space to illustrate the obvious? His theme is folly, and he certainly was not teaching that hard work is foolish because you might get injured! Throughout the book, Solomon emphasized the importance of honest labor and the joys it can bring. Why would he contradict that message?

I believe Solomon was describing people who attempted to do their work and suffered because they were foolish. One man dug a pit, perhaps a well or a place for storing grain, but fell into the pit himself. Why? Because he lacked wisdom and failed to take proper precautions....

Another man broke through a hedge [wall, fence], perhaps while remodeling his house, and a serpent bit him. Serpents often found their way into hidden crevices and corners, and the man should have been more careful. He was overconfident and did not look ahead.

Verse 9 takes us to the quarries and the forests, where careless workers are injured cutting stones and splitting logs. Verse 10 pictures a foolish worker par excellence: a man who tried to split wood with a dull ax. The wise worker will pause in his labors and sharpen it. As the popular slogan says, “Don’t work harder—work smarter!”...

The common denominator among these “foolish workers” seems to be presumption. They were overconfident and ended up either hurting themselves or making their job harder.

⁸ The Hebrew employs a plural of intensity here—lit. “he must exert strengths.” This is meant to demonstrate the great cost of foolishly bypassing the simple step of preparing one’s tools.

⁹ Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 132.

¹⁰ *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Ec 10:12–15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Wise words are said to be *gracious*; the Hebrew says they are ‘grace’, embodying all that is gracious or kindly (cf. Ps. 45:2; Prov. 22:11 where the same word is used): appropriate (Prov. 15:23; 25:11), helpful (Eph. 4:29; Col. 3:8), likeable (Prov. 25:12, 15). *Words may devour* (literally ‘swallow up’, cf. Ps. 52:4). They consume the fool’s reputation (v. 3), his character (Jas 3:6), his impact for good (Eph. 4:29), and finally the man himself (Matt. 12:36f.)” (Eaton, 154).

¹³ Ibid. Also, “Using a merism, a figure of speech in which polar opposites are chosen to indicate totality (cf. examples in Ecc. 3:2–8), Solomon characterized a fool’s speech as foolish and wicked madness both at the beginning and at the end (i.e., from start to finish)” (Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 1002).

¹⁴ “Refusal to accept the wholesome wisdom of God always leaves people without purpose or direction in life” (*New Bible Commentary*, Ec 10:12–15).

¹⁵ “This is a proverbial expression for extreme ignorance like the modern proverb, “He doesn’t know enough to come in out of the rain” (Glenn, 1002).