

Week 13 - A Word to the Wise, No Fooling - Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 1:20-33

Introduction

In Ecclesiastes 10, Qoheleth turns his attention to the subject of folly.

As we begin, allow me to share three universal truths about folly:

We readily see it in others, and when we do, we view it with great disdain and disgust and shake our heads at the apparent absurdity of it.

However, **we seldom see it in ourselves** - at least not in time to keep us from committing it.

And **none of us wants to be thought a fool**.

Therefore, it would be beneficial to have an accurate definition of folly so we might have a better chance of avoiding it.

In simple terms, folly is the opposite of wisdom - that seems obvious enough.

Biblically speaking, since we know God is wisdom, folly would logically be anything contrary to God and the wisdom he reveals in his Word.

In fact, **Psalm 14:1** defines a fool as one who says, *"There is no God."*

Or, since the original Hebrew says, "No God," without the "there is," we could just as easily understand the fool to be one who says no to God rather than denying his existence.

Most Christ-followers can rightly distinguish between good and evil.

We know that some things are morally right while others are morally wrong, and we know it's better to do what's right.

However, most choices we face aren't between good and evil but between wisdom and folly, and while folly is often closely associated with evil, they aren't the same thing.

A fool is identified more closely with impulsive disobedience, ignorant blundering, self-centered arrogance, and general disregard for what is right than deliberate and thought-out maliciousness or open rebellion.

Qoheleth has previously given us several traits of a fool:

He has said a fool is morally blind [**Ecclesiastes 2:14**], lazy [**Ecclesiastes 4:5**], hot-tempered [**Ecclesiastes 7:9**]

He also says the fool refuses to take advice [**Ecclesiastes 9:17**] and is displeasing to God [**Ecclesiastes 5:4**].

Each of these is a mark of a fool, and no one needs to possess them all to be foolish.

It can be a lot more challenging to avoid foolishness than wrong, and as much as we hate to admit it, we've all been foolish at one time or another.

The Main Ingredient memorialized that fact back in 1972:

Everybody plays the fool sometime; there's no exception to the rule.

It may be factual, may be cruel; Everybody plays the fool.

Qoheleth certainly had his encounters with folly, so he knows the danger it presents.

In this chapter, he shows us some of the various forms folly takes and the damage it does so that we can recognize it, more effectively avoid it in ourselves, and deal with it properly when we see it in others.

So, let's dig in and see what he has to say as he begins by revealing the nature of folly.

I. The essence of folly

If you haven't done so already, let me encourage you to open your Bible to Ecclesiastes 10 so you can follow along.

Look with me at verse 1 [**Ecclesiastes 10:1**], where Qoheleth writes:

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

Using a fragrant analogy, Qoheleth reveals that folly is odious, overpowering, and obvious to all.

Perfume is supposed to smell good - that seems obvious.

However, in this case, the perfume smelled so good it attracted flies, and when the flies got into the fragrant oil, they drowned, putrefied, and spoiled the perfume.

That's an analogy you'll readily understand if you've ever been near the Mississippi River when the mayflies hatch.

Each year, hundreds of thousands come up out of the water to breed and die all in a day or two.

And, while one mayfly corpse might not offend, the sheer number of them leaves quite a pungent mess behind.

So, the first thing Qoheleth reveals about folly is that it stinks and provokes a negative reaction.

But even more than that, folly is overpowering.

In 9:18, he pointed out how one sinner can destroy much good.

Now, he says that it doesn't take much foolishness to spoil things.

As they say in the old Brylcreem ad, "A little dab'll do ya."

It seems unfair, but all it takes is one harsh word, one rash exclamation, one rude comment, one unkind utterance, one lapse of discipline, or one foray into illicit pleasure to ruin a reputation.

It's far easier to mar a surface than to keep it spotless.

Or, to use Qoheleth's analogy, it's easier to create a stink than maintain sweetness.

Next, Qoheleth states that foolishness can't be hidden - it's obvious to all.

Look with me at verse 3 [**Ecclesiastes 10:3**],

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

Qoheleth let a little humor slip out here as he says there's no way for a fool to disguise his folly, saying that he can't even walk down the road without revealing that he's a fool.

We read in **Proverbs 17:28** how a fool might conceal his foolishness by keeping silent.

However, Qoheleth says that will likely be a temporary solution, and the fool won't be thought wise for long because his bearing will ultimately reveal him.

Part of the definition of a fool is that he's the only one who can't see his folly, so it never occurs to him to hide it [**Proverbs 13:16**].

Folly is odious, overpowering, and obvious, and in verse 2, Qoheleth reveals where it comes from - a person's heart.

Look at what he says [**Ecclesiastes 10:2**] -

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

Very quickly, as much as some of us might want to apply this to our modern political scene, that wasn't on Qoheleth's mind, and this verse isn't a proof text for conservatism.

But if you aren't dissuaded by pulling verses out of context to make a point, this one would be perfect.

In the Bible, the right hand is typically associated with strength, skill, and authority.

Likewise, blessings were conveyed by laying the right hand on the recipient and sitting on the king's right hand is considered to be the place of honor.

Also, the heart is used to describe the central core or essence of who a person is.

Therefore, since wisdom and folly are inclinations of the heart, Qoheleth's point is that both the wise man and the fool simply tend to follow their nature.

When you first begin riding a motorcycle, you soon learn it's considerably different from driving a car.

You steer a car by turning the steering wheel in the direction you want to go, but on a motorcycle, you look where you want to wind up and lean in that direction.

And the motorcycle naturally turns in the direction of its inclination.

That analogy applies to seeking the right way to go in life because the first step in going in the right direction is making sure your heart is leaning in the right direction.

Proverbs 4:25-27 tells us to fix our eyes on the prize, mind our step, and stay on the path as we turn away from evil.

Then, looking at **Philippians 4:8**, we see what a wise person will focus on so that their heart is naturally inclined in the right direction.

Verse 4 [**Ecclesiastes 10:4**] provides a transition between the thoughts of verses 1-3 and what follows and gives a practical example of applied wisdom.

The general idea seems to be that the wise person will be **patient**, **persistent**, and **peacemaking**, even when opposed by those in authority.

Fools abound, and many fools are in positions of power, so it pays to know how to deal with them.

One commentator refers to what Qoheleth describes here as "that rather absurd human phenomenon, the huff."

While resigning your post and storming off in righteous indignation might feel marvelous, it's far better to remain calm and respond quietly because, who knows, your steadfast demeanor might change your situation for the better.

Then again, leaving one's place could also mean abandoning wisdom and responding in kind, but the result would be similar because it's better to remain wise than lapse into folly.

Returning anger for anger, barb for barb, and insult for insult is never the way to find peace.

A good rule of thumb is not to contend with a fool because they'll bring you down to their level, people won't be able to tell you apart, and they will beat you with experience.

In verses 5-7, Qoheleth turns his attention to the foolishness of those in authority and pronounces it evil.

II. The evil of folly

Let's look at those verses together [**Ecclesiastes 10:5-7**] -

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

At some point, Qoheleth noticed that a fool rose to a place of authority, and everything turned topsy-turvy.

Unfortunately, things haven't improved since Qoheleth's day, and while some of us might claim to live with a fool or work with fools, polls show most people believe we're governed by fools.

As Will Rogers once observed, "There are men running governments who shouldn't be allowed to play with matches."

It would be inappropriate for me to delve into which political leaders are wise and which are foolish because opinions can vary on that topic.

However, as Qoheleth says, fools tend to reveal themselves, and with an approval rating of only 15% for Congress and 35% for the President, it seems most people don't have a lot of confidence in those who govern us.

Unfortunately, since everything trickles downhill, errors in governance lead to evils in society, and Qoheleth observes how everything gets turned on its head when the wrong people get into power.

The specific ills he noticed in verses 6-7 were competent people being displaced in favor of those who were inexperienced and inept, along with the upheaval of societal norms.

And he attributed both to the foolish leadership of the ruler in verse 5.

While some today would applaud the reversal of fortunes he describes and determine that it was fitting for the rich and poor to swap positions, Qoheleth wasn't talking about social justice.

He described a society that was out of whack, where unworthy and incompetent people were placed in positions they were unsuited for, while those with the wisdom and discernment needed to govern properly were cast aside.

That tells us that what we see with our current push for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the expense of competence is nothing new.

Then again, Qoheleth has already told us [**Ecclesiastes 1:9**] that there's nothing new under the sun.

Human nature hasn't changed.

So, whenever you see a society that's turned upside down - where evil is called good and good evil, immorality is celebrated, people are selectively persecuted, logic is denied, and God is ignored - you can know folly is in control.

The question is how God's people should seek to live in such a world.

First, we need to consider why things are the way they are.

If God is sovereign and places people in positions of authority [**Romans 13:1**], why do we find so many foolish people in positions of power?

Maybe it's because God wants us to see how foolish we are and how senseless it is to put our faith in human institutions.

Maybe God wants us to be dissatisfied with this world, so we cast our eyes heavenward to seek him and look forward to his divine rule in heaven.

But for now, our best option is to heed Qoheleth's advice in verse 4 and stay the course calmly and quietly, not running away or claiming we don't have to obey the fools in power and not mirroring foolishness in the face of foolishness but demonstrating Christ.

By following that course, we might even change things for the better.

Qoheleth turns next to a series of statements that take a bit of sorting out to understand what he's getting at.

And in them all, we see the effects of folly.

Let's begin with verses 8-11, where we see that a life of folly yields consequences [**Ecclesiastes 10:8-11**] –

He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed. If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.

III. The effects of folly

Qoheleth may simply be pointing out that the world's dangerous and that it pays to be careful - but that really doesn't seem to fit the thrust of the chapter.

However, the Bible often speaks about pit-digging as an act of treacherous violence.

Witness passages like **Psalms 35:7**, where the psalmist complained to God about his enemies digging a pit as part of a plot to kill him.

Also, in **Psalms 7:15-16**, the psalmist describes a man digging a pit out of wickedness and falling into it.

Likewise, the imagery of tearing down a wall hearkens to **Proverbs 22:28** and the prohibition of tearing down lawful boundaries - a deliberately malicious act.

So, we can imagine the image of someone tearing down a boundary wall and getting bitten by a serpent in the process.

Both examples point to the natural consequences of an immoral act, placing them in the "just desserts" category.

However, the next two examples are slightly different as they describe the inherent risks in many everyday activities.

And just because an activity is commonplace doesn't mean there isn't room for folly.

Having spent years in manufacturing, I could share many accounts of seeing people hurt in small and large ways when they let their guard down.

A person can easily get hurt doing the most mundane things.

Then, he points to the man who fails to sharpen his axe and causes himself to expend excessive effort.

Abraham Lincoln is quoted as having once said if he was given six hours to chop down a tree, he'd spend the first four sharpening his axe.

Qoheleth then compares wisdom to a sharpened blade.

It doesn't require much imagination to see that we can apply his meaning to ensuring we're well prepared before taking on a task or embarking on an endeavor.

All in all, I found the examples in verses 8-10 to be fairly straightforward, but then I came to verse 11 and had to scratch my head a bit.

After thinking about what Qoheleth could possibly mean, I have come up with two possibilities that I believe are plausible.

First, he could mean that his counsel of verse 10 has an opposing truth and that unwarranted delay is also a disadvantage.

I have no affection for snakes and never want to be close enough to a snake to find out, but I suspect if one was going to charm a snake, it would be best to get on with it before he got bit.

While some people might pay to see a charmer work with a snake, getting bitten by a venomous serpent wouldn't be very profitable.

Or, he could be *supplementing* his counsel in verse 10 about proper preparation and saying that it pays to think ahead and recognize the dangers you might encounter.

Many of us become wiser through our failures, but I think we can agree that it would have been better to have procured wisdom and avoided the disaster.

I think either option is plausible, and perhaps it would be best to see both truths in his words.

Next, in verses 12-15, Qoheleth shows us that a fool is lacking in some essential areas.

First, we see that the fool lacks restraint in his speech.

Jesus taught that what a person says reveals who they are [Luke 6:45].

And Qoheleth says that while a wise man's words bring him a good reputation, a fool's speech is self-destructive.

The Lord's brother James writes about the destructive power of the tongue in James 3, comparing it to a small flame that ignites a roaring blaze and a deadly poison.

There are probably infinite ways that our tongues can get us into trouble and ruin our reputations because, once our words leave our lips, we lose complete control over where they go and what they do.

Next, we see the deteriorating nature of a fool's speech as what begins as mere foolishness progresses on a downward spiral into what Qoheleth calls "evil madness," indicating a kind of mental instability trending toward moral depravity.

As a classic example of this tendency, I once had a co-worker who shared a story about how he had retaliated against someone he thought had done him wrong.

He went into great detail about all that he said and did, and the climax of the story was that he had deliberately killed the other person's beloved pet dog and then laughed at his grief.

To his credit, he came the next day and apologized for telling the story as he did.

It seems that he got carried away, and while he had had a run-in with this other man that led to harsh words, the other stuff never happened.

My co-worker simply got carried away in the telling, and what began as a frivolous, unnecessary story that, at its best, still put him in a bad light degenerated into Qoheleth's "evil madness" by the end.

At least he showed a spark of wisdom in coming back to admit to the lie, apologize, and set the record straight, as difficult as that had to be.

But his error was due to the next thing Qoheleth points out, and that's how a fool's words multiply.

If there's one thing foolish people love to do, it's talk.

They are seldom silent, even if they have to invent things to talk about, and they tend to have an opinion on every topic they must share.

It's been said that a wise person speaks when they have something to say, whereas fools talk because they have to say something.

Wisdom knows that if there's anything we can be certain of, it's that the future is uncertain.

However, Qoheleth also noticed that fools like to talk about the future, whether to share predictions about future events or to boast about their plans.

Looking to James again, in James 4, we see that the better way is to submit to the Lord's will and trust him to handle the future.

Then Qoheleth basically says that life is harder when you're foolish, and he uses what must have been an idiom in his day about a man who can't even find his way to town.

It would be akin to us saying, "He couldn't find the second floor if you placed him on an escalator."

It would be difficult to miss a small town, but how could anyone miss a city?

All you have to do is walk down the road.

Mind you, being foolish isn't a matter of having a low I.Q., but it has everything to do with stupidity, and the picture Qoheleth paints is of a person who makes things needlessly difficult for themselves by their folly.

Looking ahead, the last verse of the chapter, verse 20, seems to fit better here than at the end because it's a practical example of governing speech.

Qoheleth writes [**Ecclesiastes 10:20**] –

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.

In this country, we have traditionally put a great deal of emphasis on having a God-given right to free speech.

However, being too free to criticize those in authority can still be unwise.

To paraphrase Paul in **1 Corinthians 10:23** - we may have the right, but exercising that right might not be healthy as people today are finding out that sharing a joke or meme can get you a visit from the FBI or Secret Service.

Kathy used to tell our girls, you can think anything you want, but you're responsible for what comes out of your mouth.

And Qoheleth goes even further, saying that you'd be better off not even harboring the thought lest it inadvertently slip past your lips and be heard by the wrong people.

Apply that as you will, but keep in mind that God has placed people in their positions of authority, so it pays to temper your criticisms for that reason alone.

The chapter closes with another look at government, where wisdom is much needed but in short supply.

In verses 16-17 [**Ecclesiastes 10:16-17**], Qoheleth says that the nation that's governed wisely is blessed while foolish leadership is a curse upon the land.

You've likely heard the old expression, "A fish rots from the head first."

Of course, that means that influence goes downhill, and a community will ultimately take on the characteristics of their leaders, whether for good or ill.

Qoheleth isn't being an ageist when he uses the term "child" because folly isn't restricted to the young.

He's speaking of the immaturity that can manifest itself at any age that makes one behave in a childish way.

And he says one of the signs of immaturity is excess, especially excess that's wantonly engaged in at the wrong time and for the wrong reasons.

He describes leadership that begins to party as soon as they roll out of bed and carry on the festivities all day simply as a matter of rank and privilege.

He contrasts that with wise leadership, which sits down to a good meal at appropriate times to acquire the strength to govern.

We're reminded again of the example of Daniel, who wisely refused the king's rich, unhealthy food and drink and ate to maintain peak health.

Of course, it naturally follows that living for self and excessive indulgence leads to laziness, and laziness leads to things falling apart.

The imagery in verses 18-19 is tragically clear as it reveals the practical results of a lifestyle of folly.

We see a house falling apart because of a leaky roof that the owner was too lazy to repair and the cavalier attitude that says eat, drink, and be merry; we can always buy another.

But it doesn't have to be that way because, when handled with wisdom, those things are good gifts from God's hand.

Each of those gifts has its proper use, and money is the most versatile all since it can be used for so many good things.

But when those same gifts are handled foolishly, indulgently, and wastefully - especially by the governing authorities with the power of taxation, we see something far more ominous and cynical.

Conclusion

Qoheleth's imagery in this chapter exposes the pitfalls of human behavior and societal governance when folly is introduced and allowed free reign.

As we read and consider what he says, we're challenged to examine our inclinations and actions and those of others, especially our leaders.

Folly isn't imbecility, insanity, or even error - it's wrongheartedness that leads to wrongheadedness and wrong behavior.

Folly has its roots in the rejection or disregard of the wisdom revealed in God's Word, and it's pervasive.

But it can be minimized.

So, let's consider some practical things we can do to eliminate folly in ourselves and deal with it in others.

First, we must cultivate a heart inclined toward wisdom.

Recognizing that wisdom begins with the orientation of the heart, we must commit to studying and applying God's Word with a teachable spirit while asking God for the wisdom he promises to those who genuinely desire it.

Second, we must understand the power of our words and actions and exercise restraint.

We must practice discernment in our communication, choose words that edify and build others up, exercise self-control in our behaviors, and avoid impulsive or thoughtless actions.

We must determine to steadfastly follow the path of wisdom and not match the folly of others.

Third, we must respectfully, lawfully, and, most of all, biblically demand wisdom and integrity from those in positions of authority.

We don't live in the same autocratic environment that Qoheleth did, and we have recourses he couldn't imagine.

Therefore, we must use our freedom and privilege to support those who demonstrate wisdom and advocate for God-honoring governance.

Let's close by listening to the words of wisdom personified in **Proverbs 8:32-35** –

“And now, O sons, listen to me: blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.”

Wisdom is available and waiting for those who seek it.

Let's pray.