

WHAT'S THE POINT?

the *gospel* according to *Ecclesiastes*

“The Destruction of the Fool” Ecclesiastes 10:1-11

There was a certain occasion when I was eating out with someone, and I was really looking forward to my lunch that day. I was looking forward to this soup dish. I sat down, ordered it and waited. We received our food and then I went for my spoon and this little winged bug crawled on the plate that my bowl was on. Then another bug, and another and another. I think there was a total of five or six bugs that came out. Needless to say, I no longer wanted the soup.

I'm sure the soup itself was delicious. It always had been before that. But the little bugs affected my appetite for it. There was no way I was eating that delicious soup with such disgusting little bugs hanging out around it.

This situation reminds me of Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 10:1: “Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.” The ointment could be perfectly crafted, but who wants to buy an ointment with some dead bugs in it? Solomon's point is that this is how foolishness can destroy wisdom. Solomon brings this point out because, as we have been learning, wisdom is better than foolishness; but foolishness can seem to overpower wisdom in this world.

You know, if foolishness can take out wisdom, then why pursue wisdom? We've asked this question at various points, and now we enter into chapter 10 where Solomon is going to show us how foolish foolishness is. Foolishness doesn't get off scot-free. Yes, we live in a world that's marred by sin. Yes, we live in a world where we cannot guarantee what's going to happen. Yes, foolishness can abound and even seem to overpower wisdom. But foolishness remains foolish and there are consequences for it.

Before going any further, let's pray together and then read our text together from Ecclesiastes 10:1-11:

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: ⁶ folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. ⁷ I 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.

In the book *The Valley of Vision*, which is a collection of puritan prayers, there is one prayer that asks, "Grant me never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin." What Solomon writes here gives us some practical help to answer that prayer. While Solomon does talk about the idiocy of sin from an "under the sun" perspective – meaning that he shows us that foolishness is foolish even in this world marred by sin – Solomon does go on to talk about the ramification of foolishness, which I think leads us to think of eternity.

Let's think about a fool for a moment, though. How many of you think you've ever met a fool before? You could be like me and maybe think back to high school or maybe even a job where there was this one person who was cocky. They came off as though they owned the world and people needed to bow to their wishes. If they got in trouble, it seemed like no big deal to them. In fact, they almost seemed to smile at the "privilege" of being bad. Any of you ever met someone like that? That's what I think of when I think of a fool. Or, to give another illustration, it's that person that when they speak, you put your head down and wish that you could be out of the room.

But is *that* the definition of a fool? There's one commentator who compiles Solomon's statements about a fool, and I want to quote that person. They write that a "fool lacks holiness (Eccl. 10:2) and common sense (vv. 3, 8-11). Nevertheless (guess what?), sometimes fools rule over us. In Ecclesiastes, 'the fool loves rowdy songs (7:5) and noisy, shallow laughter (7:6); he is lazy (4:5), garrulous (5:3; 10:12), [easily angered] (7:9), unreceptive to advice (9:17), morally blind (2:14), with a fatal malady at heart (10:2) and disapproved by God (5:4). He may be found in any section of society, even in the temple (5:1) or on a throne (4:13)" (Eaton, p. 152).

Solomon has shown us that foolishness is not merely an accidental problem, but it's a moral problem. If the fear of the Lord is necessary for wisdom, then a fool does not care about God's glory. Putting Scriptures together, a fool does not think in terms of the eternal. They don't ponder "above the sun." They only live for under the sun. Therefore, they live for what perceived gain they can achieve for themselves.

This means that you could have a wealthy fool or a poor fool. You can have a legalistic fool or a licentious fool. You can have a hard-working fool or a lazy fool. The point is that the fool is unconcerned about living on the basis of God, and that creates a contrast to the person who is wise. The one who is wise "fears before" God. They know the glory of God and they seek to honor him with their lives. They live on the basis of eternity, not simply this world. As a result, Solomon had already said in chapter 8 that, "¹²Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God."

But if the fool seems to destroy the wise person's actions like dead flies in ointment, why should we care about wisdom? Why not pursue folly? Even though Solomon's logic in what follows might seem disjointed, I think we can see a train of thought. Solomon gives examples of how foolishness is thwarted.

Therefore, the overall idea in these verses is that **“Foolishness will be destroyed.”** Or, to put another way, “Sin will be destroyed.” The reason I say “sin” is because I don’t think you can separate morality from foolishness. There was one commentator that I read that talked about the difference between wisdom and righteousness and sin and foolishness. However, in biblical literature, and even here in Ecclesiastes 10, we discover that the fool is one who is sinful. This isn’t simply that he should be smarter and figure out how to live life in smarter ways. It’s that this fool is one who lives life without concern for God. That’s sin. And while foolishness may last for a time, it will come to destruction.

- **Foolishness affects our actions (vv. 2-3).**

Look with me at verses 2-3 with me again: ²“A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left. ³Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.”

This reminds me of the mom who talks about how her son is really good at heart, but it’s just that he does a lot of bad things. Have you ever heard this logic before? Despite what people do – maybe even getting away with murder – we tend to think that the person is still basically good. Sin ends up becoming a dysfunction (something that’s not really a part of that person). But what if it is?

Now, hear me, I believe sin is dysfunctional. I believe that humans are still created in the image of God. But the Bible teaches us that this image is marred. And Solomon here even shows us that foolishness isn’t merely something that’s external. It’s not that you have a low IQ. Being a fool is an internal, heart problem. The psalmist affirms this in Psalm 14:1, where we read, “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” This isn’t a statement of atheism. It’s a statement of ignoring God. It’s almost more of a practical atheism of life: “God may be around, but I don’t really give him much thought.”

And many people in our day live that way, too. We have so-called pastors in our day that affirm just about anything. Our culture is a “who-am-I-to-tell-you-what’s-right-or-wrong” kind of society. I was talking to someone this past week who said that they were at a wedding of a friend and the pastor was affirming this couple as following the Lord, and yet this person said, “They’re not living for him, and yet the pastor said they’re growing spiritually.”

Question: How can you be growing spiritually if your heart is not close to the Lord and seeking him? Jesus, in quoting the prophet Isaiah, speaks to the people saying, ⁴⁴“ ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. . . .” Where’s your heart? Is it close to the Lord – seeking him in prayer and the Word and fellowship with believers who spur you on? Or is it cold or callous? Do you live like a practical atheist? Where’s your heart?

Solomon writes that a wise person’s heart is inclined to the right and the fool’s heart to the left. What does that mean? It could simply mean that the hearts are totally different. Their desires are completely different. And I do think that’s what it means, but I think it means a little more than that, too. One commentator writes on this and says, “With apologies to left-handers, the Bible generally treats the right side as the good side: ‘The right hand was associated with a strength which saves, supports and protects’” (Ryken, p. 233). Think of Jacob blessing with his right hand or Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father. But what about the left hand? Think of Jesus talking about the final judgment and how the sheep will be separated from the goats. Jesus says, “. . . he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.”

If this is what Solomon is emphasizing that means that the wise person's heart has been changed so that it's now wanting God and godliness whereas a fool's heart simply wants those things that will bring judgment upon it. The fool doesn't want a life centered around God and his glory! So, at the very center of one's being resides wisdom and foolishness.

But Solomon is quick to tell us that foolishness and wisdom don't just stay stuck inside. Just like Jesus says that our mouth speaks out of the abundance of our heart, so our actions speak to what's inside. So, Solomon writes in verse 3 that even when a fool is walking down the road, you can tell they're a fool. When we read, "he tells everyone that he is a fool," that could either mean that the fool tells everyone else that they're fools or it means that by his lifestyle, he's communicating he is a fool. I prefer the second interpretation, but I could see both.

How often have I been acting foolishly, but I'm judging everyone else around me for their foolishness. I could be sitting in church, listening to a sermon and I think, "I sure hope so-and-so is listening to this." Or, I could be in an argument with my wife thinking I am *definitely and beyond a shadow of a doubt right*, and then I push my *rightness* only to discover I was absolutely wrong. How quickly my self-righteousness is confronted! I was haughty and thus I treated her like a fool. But I was the fool.

That could be what Solomon's saying here. But again, I think he's actually communicating that a fool's life communicates foolishness. We'll expand on this a little more in the following verses, but suffice it to say that while a fool may prosper, a wise person can perceive a fool's foolishness. And over time, it becomes more obvious. Have you ever had a situation before where you've said of a certain lust, "It's no big deal. It's just in my mind?" When I say lust, I'm not talking merely about fantasizing about people. I'm talking about sinful desires for anything. It's the "I-just-can't-stop-thinking-about" kind of yearning for something more. It's coveting. You can tend to think it's not a big deal, but you need to hear Solomon's words – if you don't kill it and get rid of it in your heart, it will come out.

But you could think, "But that thing isn't a sinful thing, and it's no big deal." However, you know where your heart is leaning. Is it leaning to praise and worship and glorify God or is it drawing you away? Is it helping you in your pursuit of him or not? Be sure your sin will find you out. Your *sin* will come back at you. And, it will make itself known not just to you, but to all around you. That's simply the nature of foolishness!

So, foolishness may seem to destroy wisdom, but eventually that foolishness will expose itself in the life of a fool. Therefore, those who cling to foolishness will at some point in time be seen for what they are – fools. So, let's bring together what we've learned so far. **Foolishness is bound up in the heart. You can't control foolishness because it will come out in your actions. And, in time, fools will be exposed as fools.** To put it another way, foolishness is seen in our actions. Why pursue foolishness?

But then we have a second point:

- **Foolishness can take control (vv. 4-7).**

Read verses 4-7 with me: ⁴If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest. ⁵There 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.

What I believe is happening here is Solomon is giving a command in verse four and then in verses 5-7 he's explaining why he said what he just said. So, let's look at verses 5-7 first and then get to the command of verse 4.

There's an evil he's seen under the sun. In other words, in this world that's broken by sin, he sees an example of that brokenness. It's something that shouldn't be the way it is. As a result of a ruler, foolishness is placed high while the rich sit in a low place. Slaves are on horses, princes are like slaves. But it's the ruler's fault. The leadership of government sins and allows this to take place. I came across this quote this past week, from Mark Twain: "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself" (as quot. in Ryken, p. 235). That might be too strong, but the idea can be shared with Solomon. The leader is a fool. And we know that a fool's foolishness will come out. And not only that, it will have ramifications. That's what we see here. The fools, slaves, wealthy and princes are in the wrong order!

But wait, why is this evil? Can't the rich oppress the poor? What about that poor wise man who could have saved the city? You see, I love how complex Solomon is! But he's simply affirming the complexity of life. Before you think Solomon is anti-wealth or anti-poverty, he gives various examples to help us understand his greater intentions. The reason why this is evil is because the "rich" here contrast those who are fools. So here we have wealthy wise people and yet because they sit in a low place that means their wealth can't influence like it could. What a sad state. We're to use our money for good and even for the good of others. Money isn't to hoard. Think about the Fighter Verses a couple weeks ago from 2 Corinthians 9: **"God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."**

Paul relates *giving* back to God's kindness and by the end of that chapter, the apostle Paul attributes generosity with money back to a right understanding and embracing of the gospel! So, what Solomon says here should make sense. A wise, rich man can't use his money as well because of the position he's put it.

But then there's also slaves on horses and princes on the ground. This reminds me of the book I'm reading about our 2nd President, John Adams. When the French Revolution took place, he was against what the people were doing. While some may have thought that the scenario was just like the fight in the United States, Adams thought differently. He saw it as chaos. The people just wanted to be free, but where was a leader going to arise and what were they going to do? To *not be enslaved* doesn't tell you what freedom looks like. And this is somewhat what I think of in this passage. A slave rides a horse. Does he have any idea what leading a society looks like? Does he have any training? Yet the prince has awareness. Why is he treated as the slave? Now, again, this is a basic illustration. This isn't to say that every ruler should stay as a ruler. It's simply an analogy and I think we should take it as such.

Merging these points together, Solomon is indicating that foolishness can end up taking control in society. It doesn't just reveal itself in an individual, it can come out in society at large. Anyone ever felt that way within these United States? Maybe even within this past year? Foolishness can take control. So, what do we do?

Solomon told us in verse 4: "If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest." The assumption, based on the context, is that the ruler is in the wrong. And even though he's in the wrong, Solomon says, "do not leave your place." This was addressed

earlier in Ecclesiastes, but the idea of leaving your place was a statement to the ruler of disrespect. That idea is still the same in our culture. If you're disciplining a child and they turn around and walk away, what do you do? You might act just like your parents did with you: "Don't you walk away from me!" It's a sign of disrespect.

Now, it's true that in Ecclesiastes 8, there are times where walking away *might* be best because you cannot participate in the ruler's sin. But the general principle is to seek out how best to respond to the evil ruler. And the best way to respond – the optimal way to respond – is through calmness. I like what a man by the name of Derek Kidner said, **"it is better to have only one angry person than to have two"** (as quot. in Ryken, p. 236). Listen, the rulers and authorities in this world that we have were given by God. We shouldn't hastily walk away from that. Instead, we should all recognize God's providence in placing us here in the United States of America in the 21st century for such a time as this. Instead of getting angry, pray for calm. Paul, in the midst of an increasingly oppressive Roman government called people to pray for their leaders so that the Christians could lead quiet and peaceable lives. That should be our hope as well.

This principle should be in all relationships. Parenting, work, government, church, spouses. How do we relate to one another? Just because someone else gets angry doesn't mean we should. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Did you know that the gospel points us to live this way? When the apostle Peter encourages his people with how to respond to the government, he talks of Jesus as our reason for godliness towards the government. In 1 Peter 2:13-15 Peter writes, **"¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people."** Okay, so this is God's will, but how can I do this? Why would God call us to this? As Peter continues to write in this chapter, he moves on to slaves response to their masters and then he tells them why they should endure suffering: **"because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."**

Wait a second, Peter turns this all around. We were the fools. We were the ones running from Jesus, but what did Jesus do for us? He lived perfectly. He did not revile. He trusted God. He died for us to reconcile us to God. Therefore, Peter says that we ought to share in Jesus' sufferings in this world and point people to their need for Christ. We were just as needy as that emperor or governor. Shouldn't our desire be for their soul's good? And shouldn't we be concerned for all of society, too? If the governor's foolishness comes out and extends to others, then our concern for the leader is also a concern for the people and the culture around us.

Trust God and lead a quiet and peaceable life. In case you think that's not going to work, just remember that through Jesus' humility, salvation came to you! So, why pursue foolishness? It comes out and while it can take control, wisdom can overpower it in time.

Now we come to the third and final reason Solomon gives for why foolishness will be destroyed.

- **Foolishness is impatient and leads to failure (vv. 8-11).**

Look down at verses 8-11 now: 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.

If Solomon is emphasizing the stupidity of foolishness, then I think we have a good context to understand these verses. In verses 8-9 we have four accidents that can happen on the job. You have a person who digs pits and guess what? There's a danger of falling into that pit. You have a person who breaks down walls and guess what? You have a danger of a snake coming out and biting you. You quarry and can be hurt by the stones. You can split logs and be hurt by them.

In other words, every job has its problems – things that can hurt us. Even having a desk job can be bad for your knees and for your body overall because you're not moving around. But what does this have to do with wisdom and foolishness? Well, just like you'd want to be careful on the job and seek to not get hurt; so it should be in life. Do you really want to walk around life like a fool?

The point here is that at some point in time, foolishness will not only be seen and it will not only affect others, but it will destroy you. As Pastor Phil Ryken said, "For every folly, there is an equal and opposite self-destruction" (Ryken, p. 238). So, you can dig your pit the way you think is best. You can tear down the walls you want to tear down. But you will fall and get bit. Foolishness cannot protect you.

Oh how this makes me think of people I've known through the years who embraced secret sins even saying, "It's not going to control me. No, I have a handle on it." Only to discover that the tentacles of sin slowly and increasingly strangled their heart until eventually they embraced the sin in their life. Then there was destruction in their family as their family had to reel from the ramifications of sin. Then the person had to go to jail or experience some other forms of punishment. But it wasn't just that person who got hurt – it was their friends and family.

I don't know who said this, but I think this statement sums up what we read here: **"Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay."**

If this is the case, what should we do? Answer: live wisely! Solomon has been giving many reasons why we may not want to choose wisdom. There's pain in this world. There's difficulty. The fools seem to get off better. But now here, Solomon says, "Foolishness will catch up at some point in time." And then with verses 10 and 11, we hear Solomon's exhortation to us on how we should live.

The first illustration is about blunt iron. And he says that if you're going to continue your job, it's better to spend time sharpening it than to work harder with the blunt force. In the end, the time it takes to sharpen it is worth it. Living wisely means patience. It does mean taking more time. But it also means greater effectiveness in the long-run. Foolishness will wear you out and swallow you whole. Wisdom, though it calls us on an arduous journey, leads to greater satisfaction and effectiveness.

So while you may be living your days wondering "WHY?" all these hardships are happening, remember that God's sharpening you and you should be depending on him to sharpen yourself and your actions for

his glory. What practical encouragement. Have patience! Take time. Do the hard work in this life. Godliness isn't easy, but it's worth it.

But then we come to the second illustration and while it's similar, it might have an added nuance. Yes, we are to be patient, but this illustration tells us to hurry up and be patient: "If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer." If you want a charmed snake, you'll want to get right on it and charm it. But you'll also recognize it might take some time. This is how it is with wisdom: get right on it. Be wise. Live wisely. Now be patient as you learn all the lessons God wants you to learn.

Honestly, I wonder if God is trying to highlight this lesson for me right now. As most of you know, my dad went to the hospital because he had a stroke 9 days ago. But in the midst of that, there have been several other things that have cropped up that have caused some additional trial for me. Last week as I was thinking through each of these items, I wanted to share these burdens with some friends; so I e-mailed a few of the elders and asked them to pray. You know what happened? Two elders encouraged me by quoting Scripture to me. And, get this, one pointed me to James 1 in person, and another send me James 1 in an e-mail about five minutes later. Do you know what James 1 says, "²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God. . . ." You find yourself in various trials all at once? Have joy! (Wow, this sounds like Solomon, doesn't it?) Why have joy? Because God is testing your faith. He wants you to shake off that "independent" spirit and embrace a spirit of dependence on Christ. But know this, it's not going to happen overnight. God wants you to learn steadfastness. Keep going. Keep moving.

But how are we going to keep moving? How can we endure? Wisdom. You need wisdom. And here's the glorious truth. If you're a child of God, ask. He will give wisdom liberally! And this wisdom that God gives is a Jesus-birthed wisdom. Remember Jesus' illustration between the wise and the foolish men? The wise man built his house upon the what? The rock. Who is the Rock? Jesus is our rock.

And here's the reality that Jesus teaches: those who build themselves on the Rock of Jesus, are those whom Jesus says, "hears these words of mine and does them." The words of Jesus that he is talking about here are the words in the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon that talks about him being the fulfillment of the Law and he being the one who makes people blessed. These words of the sermon talk about the Law's nature of causing people to see their sin and then leading them to their need for God's grace. These words lead people to trust Jesus, and then once they trust Jesus, we're told by him that we grow in our obedience.

Oh, will you follow folly? Why? Jesus tells us the end of the fool: hell. Jesus talks more of Hell than he even talks of Heaven – not to be vindictive or mean – but to warn and to state the judgment to come. This is the path of the fool. Here we see more of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. Someday, your folly will be revealed and you will experience the external pain that folly brings. Why not turn to Wisdom? And when I say "wisdom" here, I mean, Jesus. He is the wisdom from God. Why not turn to Jesus who took the curse of God so people could experience the embrace of God?

If you've trusted Jesus, there's hope for you! God doesn't leave you in foolishness, but he changes your heart and turns it around so that you can grow in your love and obedience to him. For those of you who are struggling with this obedience (which is all of us), Jesus promises he will never leave you nor forsake you. And some day, in the end, Jesus will separate the "sheep" from the "goats" and will

raise you up to everlasting glory! Foolishness will be destroyed. Wisdom will be exemplified. And this all happens because of Jesus.

This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.

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