

WHAT'S THE POINT?

the gospel according to Ecclesiastes

“The Divergence of People’s Words and Ways” Ecclesiastes 10:12-20

This past week I came across a story of the late 17th and early 18th century Swedish king. Because I only have one source validating it, I’m not comfortable giving a name of the king. But either way, it makes for a good story. While this king had certain wits about him with regards to war, and he could restrain himself quite a bit; there were also stories of his foolishness. This king at 15 years old had some stories of his behavior that include “riding on horseback through his grandmother’s apartment, knocking people to the ground in the city streets, and practicing firearms by shooting out the windows of the palace. In response, the leading preachers [in that country] all agreed to preach from Ecclesiastes 10:16 on the same Sunday, pronouncing woe on a land with a child for a king and princes that feasted in the morning” (as quot. in Ryken, p. 247).

What’s scary is that if someone is a ruler, their foolishness will affect everyone in the nation over which they rule. In this story, we see a young, foolish king whose actions revealed it – and as we’ve learned earlier in this chapter – foolishness cannot be held up inside, it has to come out in the life of the fool. This is part of Solomon’s point in this chapter. While we live in a world that is broken by sin, the Preacher emphasizes to his congregation that while foolishness seems to get all the advantages, it does eventually destroy. And it doesn’t just destroy others – it destroys everyone – including the fool.

So here in the text we’re going to study this morning, we see that wisdom is greater than foolishness. Now, in case you’re just now jumping into this study in Ecclesiastes, I do want to take a moment to define wisdom and foolishness again. Wisdom and foolishness isn’t the difference between having a high IQ or a low IQ. The Bible says that a wise person is someone who bases themselves and their whole life on God. They know his glory, want to seek him and want to live for him no matter what happens in their life. The fool, on the other hand, is a person who lives their life however they think best. They may be moral people or immoral people, but they don’t depend on God and seek him. Solomon tells us here in Ecclesiastes that to live wisely – “fearing God” – is better than foolishness – “not fearing God.”

We’ve seen some of the consequences of foolishness in our study last week, but now we’re going to move into verses 12-20 of chapter 10, and Solomon shows us more specifically on how foolishness and wisdom affects a person’s words and ways of life. Before going any further, let’s pray and then read Ecclesiastes 10:12-20 together:

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

¹³The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. ¹⁴A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him? ¹⁵The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city. ¹⁶Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes

feast in the morning! ¹⁷Happy 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! ¹⁸Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. ¹⁹Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. ²⁰Even 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. ¹

As I've often said, whenever reading the Bible, we must always ask, "What's the context of these verses?" So, what's the context of these verses? Look at verse 2 of this chapter: A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. ² This verse gives a great overview of Solomon's purpose. The ways of the wise are completely different than the ways of the fool. One is blessed. The other is punished. And those two ways to live are more specifically spelled out here in verses 12-20.

Solomon shows us the divergence between a fool's words and ways and a wise person's words and ways. To put another way, Solomon tells us that **The words and ways of the wise are better than a fool's words and ways**. Clearly, you can see that the author is emphasizing our words and our actions. You could say, "Why does he pick words *and* actions?" But just think about it for a moment with me. Do you want someone who behaves well, but can never communicate in a gracious way? They're all about "getting the job done," but they don't care about whether or not people are hurt in the process. Words matter, and how we communicate those words matter, too. If you don't care about *how* you communicate then you're only thinking about you and not how to help others. But actions matter, too. Sometimes people are so focused on "truth-telling" and getting all the information straight, but they neglect their life. They know all the right answers to living, but they don't follow through.

Solomon tells us that wisdom and foolishness by necessity *must* affect both words and actions. A person who doesn't walk their talk is missing something vital and is allowing foolishness to creep in and control. So, let's look at these two categories that are before us and see the divergence between a wise person and a fool:

1. Wise words are better than foolish words (vv. 12-14).

Verse 12 gives a nice overview of the difference or divergence between the fool's speech and the wise person's speech: The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.³ See the contrast between the two? Words of the wise and the lips of a fool. Those are parallel-yet-opposite statements. Meaning "mouth" and lips" are synonymous, but the wise person is opposite from the foolish person. This matters because of what I'm about to say. This "parallel-yet-opposite" idea should (I think) continue on. So, we see "win him favor" and "consume him." As I thought about how the ESV translates this, I didn't see enough *opposite*. Let me explain. In both lines, I see something happening *to* the wise and the foolish person. The fool is consumed and the wise man receives favor. Both are *getting*. My thought was that if the fool receives, the wise should give.

¹*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:12–20.

²*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:2.

³*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:12.

Now, I could be completely wrong on this. Solomon could be saying that the wise person receives favor; but I think the poetic structure more favors an opposition between the wise person's mouth and the fool's mouth. And, actually, even if you look at the ESV footnote, you'll see that another potential way of translating this. Look down and you see this could be translated "are gracious." That seems to fit the parallel-yet-opposite idea. The wise person gives grace and the foolish person receives destruction.

Words are powerful. Have you ever had an experience where you said something and as those words were coming out of your mouth, you were thinking, "No, please! Stop talking. I hope they don't hear what I'm saying!" Once those words come out of your mouth, you cannot take them back. And those words have force. I remember as a child when someone would try to be mean on the playground, we'd say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!" Is that true? Well, I think we can choose to not be bitter or angry; however, if people's words never hurt you - you're unfeeling. And, you're not recognizing the Scripture's teaching on words.

The apostle James says that we bless and curse people and this mouth of ours can destroy. So, while we may say that words don't hurt - they can and they do. And the words that come out of our mouth is the most basic evaluator of our heart. Jesus said, ". . . out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."⁴ Speech is a symptom of our heart. Does speech reveal your folly or your wisdom? Now, you could still say, "Well, I only speak foolish a little bit," but let's say you're sick. Do you want to be content with a little sickness? Even the little cold that just keeps hanging on isn't something we love. How much more with sin? Do you want just a little bit of foolishness to stick around inside? Let's embrace Solomon's words here. Where's your heart? Well, let's look at the symptoms of your speech. Solomon says that the wise give grace, and the fool's words consume them.

Look at the wise first. They give favor. They give grace. Proverbs 15:23 says, "²³**To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!**"⁵ Verse 28 says, "²⁸The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer. . . ."⁶ A wise person considers and ponders how best to talk to people. By the way, all of these proverbs (and even this verse in Ecclesiastes) assumes something very important: if you're wise, you *will* talk to people because you see the beautiful privilege it is to actually minister to people with your words. That means that if you don't talk to people, you're squelching the privilege that God has given you with your words. God has privileged you to minister his grace through you to others. Speak. You may say, "But I don't know what to say." Oh, if that's you, praise the Lord. In just a moment, we're going to talk about the fool's speech and they're too quick to speak. If that's you, slow down. Wait. But if you're slow to speak (as James calls us to be), then that's a wonderful opportunity to ponder what you're going to say. But don't just ponder. Once you've pondered, then speak. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian church, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."⁷

And we can only speak this way because of Jesus who is the wisdom from God and spoke as such. In Luke 4:22, we read that **people "marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth."**⁸ In prophesying the Messiah, the psalmist wrote, "grace is poured upon your lips; therefore, God has

⁴*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 12:34.

⁵*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Pr 15:23.

⁶*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Pr 15:28.

⁷*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Col 4:6.

⁸*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 4:22.

blessed you forever.”⁹ Jesus is the One who perfectly spoke which shows that he is perfect wisdom. Now, by his grace to you, you can minister grace to others through your words because your heart has been changed.

Let’s put this in Solomon’s speech here. The wise speak and they minister grace to people so that people are benefitted. They’re given what they need. The ramifications of this would be astounding. If all people were wise and spoke with wisdom – all would be continuously blessed!

But Solomon really wants us to see the negative ramifications of the fool’s speech. You see, so many in this world do not run to Christ. Instead, we cling to ourselves and our own way. We’re fools. What’s the fool’s speech like then? Solomon says that when a fool speaks, it’s foolish at first but by the end of their talk, it’s madness. So, the speech of a fool goes from bad to worse. It’s like Romans 1, the world claims to be wise, but they’re fools because in all they talk about they ignore God. This is only going to lead to worse scenarios. In addition to this, Solomon says that the fool won’t stop talking. They think they’re smart. They think they’re wise. They think they know what they’re talking about. Though no one knows the future, they’ll take a stab at it. Though no one can guarantee what tomorrow will bring, they’ll address the unknown. It’s like the person that the apostle James talks about who makes their plans, ignoring God; and James says that every person ought to say “Lord willing, we will live and do this or that.” But the fool takes all this for granted. They live as though they own the world and their destiny. They’re in charge of time and their schedule. And they’ll tell everyone else how to take charge, too.

As I preach this, I want to address certain people who may be “talkers” and may be more “honest” in their speech. You know that you tell it like it is, and you’ve hurt people in the past with your words. But when you think about those scenarios, your justification is something like, “That’s just who I am. If people don’t like me the way that I am, then that’s their problem.” Or, you could think about those previous scenarios and say, “Well, I didn’t mean it that way. They’re just sensitive.”

In looking at texts of Scripture, we are (as much as possible with us) to live at peace with people and we are to be concerned that we have ministered grace to the hearers. Clearly people can be too sensitive and take us the wrong way – and we’re not responsible for that. But sometimes I think angry people justify their anger by always putting blame on others. Probe your life. If there is a consistent pattern of hurt from others and you are the common thread, then it might be you – not others. Those who are wise have the privilege to sacrifice themselves and minister grace to others.

So, a fool hurts. A fool speaks beyond his knowledge. A fool is presumptuous. A fool self-destructs. But, in case you don’t believe this, Solomon takes us further and shows us that our foolishness doesn’t merely affect our speech. It will come out in our actions.

2. The work of the wise is better than the work of the fool (vv. 15-20).

Verse 15 seems connected with the previous verses, but it moves us forward to the following verses by moving from speech to work. In this verse we read that the fool wearies himself with his work. That could be referring specifically to his speech wearying himself or it could be talking about his work in general. I believe it’s work in general. As I think about this, I’m reminded of when Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”¹⁰ You know, we tend to think that we

⁹*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 45:2.

¹⁰*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 11:28.

have to impress people, control our lives, talk like we're somebody. All the while God says to us, "I know who you really are." He made us to be dependent on him, not self-dependent. He didn't make us to have to prove ourselves. He didn't intend for us to impress God or others. Instead, even though we are sinners, Jesus came to do what we could never do – please God perfectly because he's perfect. And at Jesus' death, he took our punishment. He did this to show that only he could save. Only he could take our burden of sin and the consequences of our sin. Only he could set us free from that weight. Will you trust him?

If you think you have to impress, you're going to try to work really hard so that your words and actions protect you and come off right. You'll try to sound fancy or you might not say anything because you're too afraid of what others will think of you. You'll do certain things to make God happy or others respond the way you want them to respond. All of this is the weariness because you're more focused on protecting you than you are on receiving God's grace and ministering that grace to others. Don't weary yourself by doing what you weren't created for. Rest from trying to gain approval in God or in others around you.

But there's more to this. The second line of verse 15 says, "for he does not know the way to the city."¹¹ What does that have to do with weariness of toil? This word "for" in the Hebrew is a conjunction word that connects with the previous phrase; however, this word could be translated with various words like "with, that, so that, if, because, whom" and many others. The translation depends heavily on context. So, what does this mean? His labor in life is toilsome because he doesn't know the way to the city? Saying it that way still doesn't make much sense. You might be able to get to an interpretation off of this, and I know of at least one commentator who has; however, it doesn't seem to fit well.

Personally, I take a different viewpoint. Look at verse 15 again and after the first phrase, ask the question "Why?" and then look for the answer to be an analogy which describes the fool's character. It's not saying he *literally* doesn't know how to get to the city. Instead, it's akin to when we say something like, "You're driving in circles." Have you ever felt like that? Well, that's the fool's life. He's always moving about, but he's going nowhere.

And get this, the *city* should be obvious. When you're driving past a big city, you can pretty well guess how you're going to get there. Even if it takes you a while to figure out which ramp to get off, you know the direction of where the city is. But the fool can *see the city*, and can never arrive. He keeps moving around, but never reaches the obvious destination. That's the work of the fool. And Solomon expands on this in the following verses. Actually in verses 16 and 18, Solomon talks of the fool. In verses 17 and 19, he talks about the wise.

In doing so, he talks about the work of the wise and the fools both in authority and those in everyday life. He creates a nice contrast between them and I think actually reveals that **the fool fails to understand the purpose of the gifts given to him whereas the wise are discerning and they know the purpose of the gifts around them.**

Let's evaluate the fool a little more and look at verses 16 and 18: ¹⁶Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! ¹⁸Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. ¹² There are fools in high places and fools in everyday life. The nature is the same.

¹¹²*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:15.

¹²²*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:16, 18.

There's ignorance of life and an inability to treat gifts from God appropriately. So, we start with rulers. When rulers are foolish, the whole nation suffers. Makes sense. Foolishness and sin never just affects the individual. It *always* affects others. So it is in a nation. Solomon says, "Woe to you, O land." That means that God's judgment is on a nation when this happens. Woe – not blessedness from God, but punishment. This would be another "vanity" in this broken world.

This scenario relates to the story I told at the beginning of this sermon – a young ruler in his teens who was foolish. That will affect the nation. But the point isn't so much youthfulness as much as foolishness. A child doesn't often have wisdom appropriate for leadership. "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child. . . ." ¹³ But you know what? I've discovered that adults can be quite foolish, too. In my years of counseling, and also in dealing with myself every day, I've found that we humans sometimes don't kill our foolishness. Instead, we just hide it better from others so that people don't notice it. We still have our childish foolishness. And, actually, I think this is more of Solomon's point. This word for "child" depending on the context doesn't have to mean someone who is young. Solomon used this word when he took the throne. In 1 Kings 3:7, he said, "you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in." ¹⁴ Just a little after this statement is when Solomon then prays for discernment.

So we see that a "child" can include someone who is simply "child-ish" or simply put, a fool. And you see this foolishness in how they treat their resources. They feast at the wrong time: the morning. What's going to happen if you begin your day with a party? You're never going to accomplish anything. You'll be exhausted and you'll just want to party. In the end, you'll be lazy. But leaders have people to care for and a nation to be concerned about. They're not stewarding their resources.

At this point, someone could say, "Yeah, leaders need to be careful with their stuff!" And we can get quick to accuse the leaders. But Solomon says the same problem exists in general life. The heart of the foolish king is the same heart of the foolish citizen. Verse 18 highlights sloth and laziness. If you're lazy, your home will fall apart. You need to keep your eye on your resources and take care of them. But what happens when you don't? The roof could fall in. This verse reminds me of a bluegrass song called *The Arkansas Traveler*. The song is about a man who sat in his house with his fiddle and just fiddled away day-by-day. There was a traveler who noticed his roof was leaking and so the traveler told the fiddler that he should patch that roof. That statement just frustrated the fiddler and the fiddler said, "I couldn't mend it now, it's a rainy day." So then the traveler said to the man that he should then work on it when it's a nice sunny day. To that, the fiddler responded, "My cabin never leaks when it doesn't rain."

Think about your life. What has God given to you to steward? It may not be a roof. Maybe you live in an apartment where someone else is responsible for that. But you have a family. Maybe you're the husband who's responsible to lead your wife and children to spiritual nourishment. Maybe you've been given hands and legs to move and work, but you're not stewarding your body as God intended. Maybe you sleep your time away whenever you have "time off" from work. What are you stewarding? And how are you stewarding?

The fool only seems to care about gaining as much pleasure as possible – receiving immediate pleasure. But is that the point of life? No. That's lazy, covetous and self-centered. But hold on a second, in listening about stewardship you could think, "Yes, don't enjoy anything in this life. Just grit your teeth and bear

¹³*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Pr 22:15.

¹⁴*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 1 Ki 3:7.

it.” That’s not Solomon’s conclusion. While life isn’t about hedonistic pleasure, God still wants us to take pleasure in the gifts he gives us. And we see that in verses 17 and 19. Look at these verses again:
¹⁷Happy 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! ¹⁹Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. ¹⁵

The opposite of woe is “happy.” So, when the king is the son of nobility – meaning someone who has been trained and who is wise in leading. As a result, they steward their resources well. But notice this, they still feast. But they feast at the proper time for the right reasons.

They feast for strength – not just for hedonistic pleasure. But that doesn’t mean that feasting isn’t pleasurable, and I think this is an important point to make. Sometimes I’ve come across Christians who talk like if they have pleasure then what they’re doing is wrong. I mean, if they really enjoy something, then they’re dishonoring God. They think they’re automatically worshipping something more than God because they love the gift God has given to them. But that may not be the case. I mean, clearly if we love something more than God, that’s sin! But does God then say, “Get rid of all my gifts from your life. Refuse them all!” Or, does God say, “I want you to turn to me and rejoice in me when I give you the gift.” I think many times it’s the second option. There is a place for true happiness in the life of a believer.

Look at verse 19. It’s almost so crazy sounding that we don’t know what to do with it. It sounds hedonistic. But is it? I personally don’t think so. Bread is made for laughter and wine gladdens the life. This is what they were made for. And haven’t you experienced the power of food in relationships? I don’t know how it is, but somehow eating with people can connect us more with others. It can even be a vehicle through which God draws us closer to one another. Friendships are made and developed over food. Did you know that even the Reformation message of justification was spread through people talking theology in the Inns of the day?

Food is a powerful medium that God has created and gifted us with. Now, don’t idolize food. Don’t feast in the morning. Don’t negate the other responsibilities of life. Don’t treat food as your god. Instead, recognize food is God’s gift! And enjoy the blessing of food. It was made to give you strength physically and it was also made to encourage the heart and help your joy.

But what about this money statement? Money answers *everything*? Here’s where we put in our interpretation and we think Solomon is saying that Money is *the answer* to everything. That’s not what Solomon says. Just like he isn’t saying that bread always makes you have joy or wine always makes someone happy. Clearly if someone is drunk, there are a multitude of sinful emotions and behaviors that emerge. So, with money, Solomon isn’t saying that in every scenario money answers everything. Nor is Solomon saying that money is *the answer* to everything. Instead, Solomon is saying that in almost everything in life, money is attached to it. You need food? You need money for that food. You need to fix the roof? You need money to do that. You need to buy that medicine? You need money. You want to have kids – you need money. You want to help someone else out – more than likely you’ll need money. Jesus even talks like this in one of his parables where he says that we are to make friends by use of money. James talks about how we aren’t just to pray for people if we have money to help them. The Bible teaches us that practical help through money can be done for God’s glory and eternal good!

¹⁵*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:17, 19.

A wise person will then recognize that they need to steward money and food in such a way to recognize it is the gift that it is. They don't idolize money or food, but they rejoice in the gifts and use them appropriately. However, the fool looks for immediately, self-focused pleasure and they end up hurting themselves and others – being consumed by foolishness.

Now, as Solomon wraps all of this information about the difference between a fool and a wise person, we could say, "Ok, so don't be a fool." And then because we have all this information, we will look down on all the foolish people around us. But read his conclusion in verse 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. ¹⁶

If foolishness starts in the heart and comes out in our words and eventually affects our actions, Solomon talks to wise people and says that we need to be careful in our speech regarding those in authority. I'm not exactly sure why he goes to this specific of a conclusion, but it definitely can hit us between the eyes. For whatever reason, it seems to me that there has been a centuries-upon-centuries old problem of people aching to put rulers down and speak against them. Clearly, in certain despotic cultures, that could imprison you. But the principle in the New Testament remains the same that we are to pray to lead quiet and peaceable lives and to honor the king and pray for our leaders.

But we don't like to do that. We'd rather talk against the rulers and lay accusations that are hastily spoken. Is that wise speech? To add to this, we live in a society where our words can affect so many more people so much more quickly. With a click of a button, we can tweet or send a message to someone and that can make it literally around the world. We can tend to think that if someone doesn't know us, it doesn't matter how we talk. But is that true? If we're not to let the thoughts permeate our mind, why is it ok on-line? This is not the way of the wise person – whether it's speech against rulers or even speech against others around us.

As we've learned, a wise person fears God – honors him, knows he's glorious and knows he's in complete control. A wise person wants God to be known and his grace to be ministered to others. A wise person seeks God's glory over their own. But a wise person knows that their eternal good is found in God's glory, too. So, a wise person can trust God and that trust comes out in their words.

This doesn't mean that we don't confront sin, but even in this Solomon has told us how to be wise in doing so. As I think through this, my mind moves to my great need for God and his grace to give me a wise heart, wise words and wise actions. I even think about this year and the 2016 election and **I long all the more for a greater kingdom – a kingdom where I won't struggle with what to say and what to do, a kingdom where I will not merely like the ruler, but I will worship him forever and ever because he is eternally glorious and perfect in all his ways. A ruler who, when he came to this world 2,000 years ago, there was no deceit found in his mouth and he showed respect to the rulers even though they were putting him to death. A ruler, who through his words and his work gave eternal grace to all who would turn from their sin to him for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.**

Oh, but there's more. The night before his death, Jesus sat with his disciples and celebrated with a meal. The Wise One lived perfectly and before his death he even exhibited his understanding of the gift of food– and one of the central commands for the church until Jesus comes in his kingdom is celebrating

¹⁶*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:20.

around food. Food speaks to our unity around Jesus and our freedom in Christ. And today, as those who have been made wise, we want to recognize this feast this morning.

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