

“Wisdom In the Little Things”

Ecclesiastes 10:1-11

In January of 1997, two Swiss men set out on a mission to be the first to circle the earth in a hot-air balloon. Their names were Bertrand Piccard and William Verstraeten. Their balloon was equipped with high-tech equipment, complete with solar panels for power and a pressurized cabin that allowed them to fly at a high altitude. Their plan was to float high enough to enter the jet stream, which would carry them around the globe at 200 miles per hour. The price tag for their experiment was a whopping \$1.5 million. Well, not long after takeoff, disaster struck. Inside their sealed cabin, the men noticed a strong kerosene smell that got worse by the minute. So they tried tightening all the connections carrying the kerosene fuel, to no avail. They communicated with their support crew on the ground seeking advice and, hopefully, a solution. They were told to descend to an altitude where it would be safe to depressurize the cabin so they could get fresh air, and try to hold on until they reached the northern coast of Africa. However, the fumes proved to be overwhelming, and they were forced to ditch their craft in the Mediterranean Sea. Upon inspection, they discovered what ended the \$1.5 million voyage: a defective hose clamp, like the ones that secure an automobile radiator hose. The cost of the clamp? \$1.16. It only served to illustrate the fact that a small, seemingly insignificant defect can ruin an otherwise noble venture.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes would certainly agree! He even says as much in the tenth chapter which begins this way:

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

All it takes is just a little bit of foolishness to destroy a life. Just a little bit of folly can tarnish even the most honorable of men. 1 Corinthians 5:6 puts it this way:

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” I can live wisely for the majority of the time, but if I tolerate a little bit of folly, it can come back to bite me. This is the issue that Solomon now addresses in Ecclesiastes 10. We've seen in this last section of the book how Solomon has pointed out that God's wisdom is essential for life in God's world. In order to successfully navigate life under the sun, you and I need wisdom from above. In chapter 10, Solomon contrasts wisdom and folly. The overall theme of what he says here is this: Since a little folly can undermine one's life, we need wisdom and discretion even in the little things as we make our way through life. Little things can have a big impact. This seems to be a common thread that ties everything together in the chapter.

This section in Ecclesiastes continues the one that begins in 9:13. In verses 16 and 18 of that chapter, Solomon says twice that 'wisdom is better.' His point is that the wisdom of God is better than the foolishness of man, and he shows us how this is the case here in chapter 10. He shows us the difference in wisdom and folly by putting them side by side. By doing so, he warns against even a 'little folly' because it can undo a life.

The word 'folly' is one that we don't often use, but we find it mentioned throughout the Bible and it is used by Solomon nine times here in this chapter. It is a word that suggests a lack of good sense, lack of foresight, and failing to realize the consequences of a decision before it is made. Folly was something that Solomon warned us against. In his three books—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs—he uses the words 'fool' or 'folly' some 128 times.

We tend to think that wisdom only applies to life's big decisions. While that is certainly true, it is even more important that you and I possess wisdom in the little things of life. Solomon's point here is to show us how little things can have big repercussions. That's why you and I need the wisdom of God even in the little things of life. You will notice that Solomon mentions four of these areas: the walk

of my feet, the work of my hands, the words of my mouth, and the witness of my life.

1. Wisdom in my WALK (10:1-3)

“Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left. Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.”

When the Bible describes someone as being a fool, it isn’t referring to a person’s intelligence or smarts. Instead, the term refers to a person who lacks the proper fear of God and is prone to go the wrong direction in life. That’s why you and I need God’s wisdom as we ‘walk’ through life, in the day-to-day decisions that come up, and for situations that we find ourselves in. Wisdom means you frequently evaluate the direction your life is headed.

Danger (v. 1)

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

This is the Preacher’s way of warning us against the subtle danger of even a little bit of folly. He uses the imagery of dead flies in perfumer’s ointment. Have you ever heard the phrase ‘fly in the ointment?’ This is where it comes from. It is an expression that is meant to convey this idea of how something so small and seemingly insignificant can cause major headaches.

Dead flies make the perfume stink. It is vivid imagery, so strong that we can almost catch a whiff of it ourselves. Can you ladies imagine opening up a bottle of fine perfume and finding two or three dead flies floating around at the top? Solomon uses this as an illustration of how a little folly can stink up a life. It

means that what flies are to perfume, folly is to one's life. The idea is that only a 'little folly' can ruin even the wisest man's life.

William Secker—*“Little sins are not like an inch of candle which soon expires, but they resemble a trail of powder, which takes the fire until at last the barrels burst asunder.”*

Spurgeon said the whole city rallies to fight the barbarian at the gate, so the enemy is more likely to send in a spy who can more easily penetrate the castle walls. In other words, folly is often very subtle. We would say it this way: One rotten apple spoils the whole bushel. Just an ounce of folly outweighs a pound of wisdom. The devil is in the details. All it takes is one rash decision, one hateful word spoken, one foolish pleasure, or one angry outburst. What takes a lifetime to build can be toppled in an instant. It took seven years to build the twin towers, but it only took terrorists an hour and a half to bring them to the ground. Little things can bring big things down. Little flies can ruin expensive perfume. Just a little flirtation with someone who is not your spouse. Just a little fib on your taxes...

Just a little bit of folly outweighs a whole lot of honor.

Direction (v. 2-3)

“A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.”

Those who are wise and those who are foolish travel in different directions. Solomon has already told us quite a bit about the fool up until this point. For instance, he has said:

2:14—“The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.”

4:5—“The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.”

5:4—“[God] has no pleasure in fools.”

7:9—“Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.”

9:17—“The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.”

The fool is morally blind, lazy, spiritually disobedient, quick-tempered, and unwilling to listen to counsel. Here, the Preacher says that the fool is directionally challenged. The wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, while the fool’s heart inclines him to the left.

This has nothing to do with being right or left handed!

Throughout the Bible, the ‘right’ is associated with power, strength, and blessing. For instance, think of Jacob placing his right hand on Ephraim to give him the greater blessing. Or, think of how Jesus is described as being at the Father’s ‘right’ hand. It is a place of power and honor.

The ‘left’ is often associated with folly. In Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, the sheep are on the right and the goats are on the left.

One translation renders verse 2 this way: “The wise man’s heart leads him aright, the fool’s heart leads him astray.” To go to the right is to be headed in the right direction. To go to the left is to be headed in the wrong direction. And so Solomon is saying that wisdom leads a person in the right direction, while folly leads them in the wrong direction. The fool is the one who is going in the wrong direction, and tragically, he doesn’t even realize it. (illus. of Lot)

He says in verse 3:

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

The idea is that the fool shows everyone he is a fool through his words, through his actions, and through the direction he travels. He has such a lack of good sense that his folly is apparent to everyone but himself. There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof are the ways of destruction!

Do you know what direction you are going in life? When is the last time you stopped to truly consider where your life is headed? Fools go in the wrong direction. Notice why this is the case.

Devotion (v. 2)

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

The Preacher is quick to point out the reason that a fool heads in the wrong direction. It all has to do with the devotion of his heart. His heart is like a broken compass that leads him in the wrong direction. Think ‘Jack Sparrow’ here! The fool travels in the wrong direction because his heart is led by the wrong devotion.

“Heart”—*the core of a person’s being; the inside part of every person that either loves or does not love God*

It can be defined as the center of affection, the seat of knowledge, the source of purpose, and the very soul of the spiritual life. The heart reveals who a person is and what a person lives for. Everything in life follows the heart. The wise person goes in the right way because his heart leans the right way. The foolish person goes in the wrong direction because his heart is so inclined.

Nothing is more important in your life than the devotion of your heart, for it determines the direction of your life. This is a constant emphasis throughout the Bible:

Proverbs 23:7—“For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”

Proverbs 4:23—“Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.”

Jeremiah 17:9—“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

Matthew 15:19—“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”

Devotion determines direction. Fools head in the wrong direction because fools are led by the wrong devotion. And wherever our heart is, our feet will soon follow.

If you want direction in life, the place to start is making sure that you're heart is in the right place. Have you ever heard of someone having a 'change' of heart? The wisdom of the gospel changes the heart of a person. God gives a new heart to those who trust Christ.

2. Wisdom in my WORK (10:4-11)

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

Wisdom in the little things means that I seek the wisdom of God in my daily walk. The next thing that Solomon does is give a specific example. He says we need wisdom for our work. I need God's wisdom for the walk of my feet and the work of my hands. Solomon says that wisdom impacts my attitude toward 'rulers' and responsibilities.

Rulers (v. 4-7)

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

In the first three verses, the Preacher tells us how we can avoid folly in our own lives. In verse 4, the Preacher tells us how to respond to the folly that we see in the lives of other people. He gives us some practical advice for dealing with the foolish people we encounter in the world. He specifically mentions the 'ruler.' Notice that he refers to the 'anger of the ruler.' This goes back to what he said earlier in 9:17 where he mentioned the 'shouting of a ruler.'

The 'ruler' is the one who is in a place of authority over us—a king, an official, a boss. It is someone in a position of power. The situation that Solomon describes involves an angry outburst or mistreatment from this person. He says in verse 5 that he had seen an evil under the sun, an error that comes from the ruler. In other words, the person in charge was very foolish. He says:

"...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."

What do we do when those at the top are fools? Some of you may work for a fool. Some of you may be married to a fool. Sometimes, the people we vote for act like fools.

He says in verse 4 that wisdom responds with ‘calmness.’

“Calmness”—*means composure; of sound mind*

The result of wisdom’s composure is that great offenses are laid to rest. Let me tell you something—this same principle applies to a lot of other situations in life, too. Those who fight fire with fire often burn the place down. Heated exchanges between friends can get out of control and damage relationships.

Proverbs 15:1—**“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”**

Philip Ryken—*“This is good counsel for workers with an angry boss, for students with an angry teacher, for parents with an angry child, and for wives with an angry husband. It is good counsel for all the situations in life when someone else is suddenly provoked to anger...The way to deal with foolish anger is not to be intimidated by it or to respond in kind but to keep calm, which we can only do by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

Wisdom in our work demands a calm and quiet spirit. We respond to fools around us, not by sharing in their folly, but by pointing them to the wisdom of the gospel that has changed our lives.

Peter writes about this very thing:

1 Peter 2:13-15—**“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the**

will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

Responsibilities (v. 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.”

Wisdom in my work demands that I have the right attitude toward rulers, but it also impacts the way that I carry out my responsibilities. Now, these verses may seem strange and random at first glance. But he is talking about more than digging pits, breaking through walls, and quarrying stones. It could be that the Preacher is reminding us that the world we live in is not a safe place, and there always exists the possibility of becoming foolish in our tasks. If we are wise, we will watch out for danger.

- the need for discernment (v. 8)
- the need for diligence (v. 9)
- the need for discipline (v. 10)
- the need for detail (v. 11)

I think the point of what Solomon is saying here is simply this—when you are working with your hands, use your head. Like he said back up in 9:10, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. Give it your best. It may be little, but don't approach it carelessly.

If you're a student getting ready to start school, determine that you are going to give it your best.

If you're an employee who has to punch the clock in the morning, see to it that wisdom goes to work with you.

Wisdom doesn't apply only to the big things in life. Wisdom is essential for the little things that we take for granted such as the direction my life is headed, the devotion of my heart, and the way I go about my daily duties. We need wisdom in the little things, don't we? Little things add up to big things. Small decisions each day can affect big outcomes in life. And a just a little folly can derail your life.

*For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of the shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of the horse, the rider was lost;
For want of the rider, the battle was lost;
For want of the battle, the kingdom was lost;
And all for the want of a nail.*

Now, you would think that sounds crazy and that it would be impossible, but every detail of life sets in motion a chain of events we cannot predict. Little things matter!

Think of how the enemy tried to derail Jesus in His mission of going to the cross and dying for our sins. He tried to trip Jesus up over something so small and insignificant as a tiny piece of bread.

*For want of a crust of bread, a fast would be lost;
For want of a fast, a prayer would be lost;
For want of a prayer, a vision would be lost;
For want of a vision, a mission would be lost;
For want of a mission, a sacrifice would be lost;
For want of a sacrifice, a kingdom would be lost.
And all for a crust of bread.*

I'm thankful that my Savior had wisdom in the little things! No flies could ever spoil the sweet fragrance of His life. He was perfect in every way, even in the little things of life. And yet He went to the cross to die for my sins and has paid the full price for my salvation. Through faith in Him, foolish sinners are forgiven and truly made wise.

Horatius Bonar—*“A holy life is made up of a multitude of small things. It is the little things of the hour and not the great things of the age that fill up a life like that of the apostles Paul or John, David Brainerd, or Henry Martyn. Little words, not eloquent speeches or sermons; little deeds, not miracles or battles, or one great heroic effort or martyrdom, make up the true holy life.”*

May God give us wisdom for the little things of life!

Wisdom in my WORDS (10:12-15)

“The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of the fool consume him. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him? The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.”

Wisdom in my WITNESS (10:16-20)

“Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness! Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. 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.”