



## LESSON 11 | WISDOM REALLY IS BETTER THAN FOLLY (9:13–10:20)<sup>1</sup>

The limitations of wisdom as well as its benefits have been explored throughout the preceding section of the book (7:1–9:12). We now return to the kind of generally affirming material with which chapter 7 opened. **Wisdom may be limited, but it is a good thing.**

Much like the book of Proverbs, the thoughts in this section of Ecclesiastes are somewhat scattered and diverse, but they are united by the theme of **wisdom**. Wisdom takes many forms in the Old Testament, but it is always at least as necessary as strength, even though it is constantly undervalued. In our text today the Teacher is mainly interested in the the undervaluing of wisdom and the consequences of doing this. At the heart of human existence there is a “madness” (10:13) that leads us to value what we should not and to despise what is truly valuable.

Wisdom and folly are contrasted to encourage us to be wise during our days “under the sun.” The Teacher doesn’t want us to be fools even for a day during our short life here under the sun. His goal is to urge us to seek, find, and use wisdom to navigate our way through life.

### **Wisdom Better Than Folly: The Example of a City (9:13-18)**

*Summary: The Teacher shares an anecdote about wisdom, which revolves around the proverb in v. 16, “Wisdom is better than strength.” This proverb reflects the theology of Proverbs as articulated in Prov. 24:3–7: “Wise warriors are mightier than strong ones, and those who have knowledge than those who have strength; for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.” However, what the Teacher observed contradicts this perspective.*

**9:13-16.** The Teacher observed a small city with few citizens. But a king used his power to lay siege to this city. Verse 15a would appear to confirm that wisdom is better than strength. All hope seemed lost until the wisdom of a commoner — “a poor wise man” — enabled the city to be rescued from the overwhelming power launched against it. But the Teacher notes three things that undermine his own observation: No one remembered the poor man (v. 15b); his wisdom was despised; and his words were ignored (v. 16). So while wisdom might appear to be better than might, what value is it if wisdom is ignored and rejected as soon as the crisis is over?

**9:17-18.** Verses 17–18 extend this line of reasoning. Verse 17 is another proverb: the calm words of the wise are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Once again this resonates with Proverbs: “One who is calm in spirit has understanding” (17:27b).

- Verse 18a is a “better-than” proverb: *wisdom is better than the weapons of war*. This is synonymous with the earlier proverb: *wisdom is better than strength*. The powerful king came with weapons of war, but the wisdom of the commoner triumphed over that power. As often with the Teacher, however, there is a stinger at the end: “one sinner destroys a whole lot of good.” The sinner is the ruler of fools who ruled over the city delivered by wisdom. His failure to honor the wisdom that rescued his city undermines for the Teacher the value of wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesson notes are excerpted from Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (313-329)

- The implications of verses 15-17 is that wealth and social class are far more impressive to people, generally speaking, than wisdom — and that people will listen more readily to people of great wealth and high social class than to a poor but wise man. It only takes one shouting fool (here “sinner,” v. 18, again underlining the connection between folly and wickedness) to persuade the masses of the rightness of his cause and so to nullify the truth of the statements that “wisdom is better than” strength and weapons of war. For one such sinner destroys much “good.” No wonder the Teacher notes in v. 13 that this occurrence made a great impression on him. Wisdom would appear to be better than might, but from observation he knows that reality is not so straightforward; the value of wisdom can be destroyed by one sinner.
- The sum of the matter is this: Wisdom is not only better than folly (2:13) but is also found to be better than military strength (9:16). It offers a way ahead when bad times happen (cf. 9:11–12). Yet in practice wisdom and its practitioners are undervalued, so that remedies are not found when needed.

### **Wisdom Better Than Folly: A Collection of Observations (10:1-20)**

*Summary: The Teacher reaffirms wisdom’s value, despite accepting its limited effectiveness in the face of human folly (and particularly a leader’s folly). This leads to a number of sayings (proverbs) concerning wisdom’s value, many of them dealing with leaders and with foolish or wise speech.*

**10:1.** The proverb of 10:1 connects back to 9:18b, but also anticipates the havoc wrought by folly later in this section. In 9:18b the Teacher states that *one sinner destroys much good*. Here he illustrates this by noting that though flies may be small, they can ruin precious ointment by making what is designed to smell beautiful stink and ferment. The point is that it takes just one rotten apple to ruin a barrel.

The Teacher’s proverb is in line with traditional wisdom. One is reminded of proverbs like that in Prov. 26:9: *“Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.”* Small though a thorn may be, it can cause serious damage when mishandled. Moreover, as a fact of experience, contrary to the real worth of things, folly is often valued above wisdom and honor (10:1b). That is the sense in which folly “outweighs” wisdom and honor—it is given more weight than it should by those who are doing the evaluating, so that only a small amount tips the scales.

**10:2-3.** Verse 2 depicts a theme that is fundamental to wisdom, that of the two ways. Here the Teacher notes that the heart of the fool inclines in a different direction from that of the wise person. In Jonah 4:11 the citizens of Nineveh are said to be incapable of distinguishing their left hand from their right; that is, they were unable to discern right from wrong. **The direction of the heart inevitably manifests itself in a person’s lifestyle, and v. 3 points out that the folly of the fool is indeed manifest in his lifestyle.** “Walks along the road” may be both literal and metaphorical. Psalm 1:1 notes the blessedness of the person who does not walk in the path of sinners, clearly using walking as a metaphor for the lifestyle of the person. The point is that the fool cannot hide the inclination of his heart.

The description of the fool showing everyone that he is a fool may mean that by his behavior/speech he shows himself to be a fool—or it could refer to him calling everyone else a fool. **Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional — one of the ways in which the fool manifests his folly is by regarding everyone except himself as a fool.**

**10:4-7.** In Verse 4 is typical of the advice of traditional wisdom. Proverbs 16:14 says, “The rage of a king is a messenger of death, and whoever is wise will appease it.” Contrary to Eccl. 8:2–3, which envisions the king’s power as absolute and encourages one to flee, the Teacher here, in line with traditional wisdom, says that the wisdom of composure will cause the ruler’s anger to subside. The “ruler” probably refers to someone of lesser authority than the king, but the same advice applies. This advice, which is very similar to traditional wisdom, is undermined, however, in what follows, as the Teacher reflects on his observation of political rule.

**10:8-11.** Verses 8–9 have in common that they concern unforeseen happenings in which a person suffers hurt. The completion of everyday tasks—the digging of pits, the demolition of walls, the quarrying of stone, and the splitting of logs—result not in satisfaction and well-being but in injury. The Teacher does not comment further on these examples, but we know him well enough by now to know what he is thinking. His theory is such that it just takes one unpredictable, uncontrollable accident to shatter traditional wisdom. Any such accident means that life is unpredictable, an enigma.

- Verse 10 extends the image of the person splitting logs: if one’s ax is blunt, it is wise to sharpen it immediately, otherwise one has to exert much more strength to split logs. Thus wisdom brings success. However, if one can endanger oneself by splitting logs, it may be better to have a blunt ax than to have a sharp one.
- Verse 11 gives this observation a further ironic twist by evoking an image that emphasizes the limits of wisdom: What use is a snake charmer if the snake bites before it is charmed or if it bites the owner? This example demonstrates that even the practical knowledge and skills of the expert do not totally eliminate dangers or guarantee success.

**10:12-15.** The verses speak further about the wise man’s speech (which is “gracious” in the sense of winning favor; cf. Prov. 28:23) in contrast to the self-destructive words of the fool, which begin in folly and end in wicked and long-winded madness. The fool’s words devour him. He does not know enough to find his way into town!

- The wise person, although he also does not control the times, at least knows that, and his “work” is therefore not the wearisome business endured by the fool. The wise may not be able to map the universe, but they at least grasp sufficient direction for the task of living everyday life. The wise “know the way to town” (v. 15)

**10:16-20.** These verses reflect on the advantage of good leadership, a theme common in traditional wisdom. It is disastrous to have a king who is immature and has no idea how to govern. The result is that the leaders feast in the morning rather than attending to the business of governance. The “Woe” at the start of v. 16 indicates just how disastrous such government can be for a nation. By contrast, the land is blessed whose king is a noble and thus well initiated into governance and whose leaders eat at the right time and in order to gain strength to govern rather than to get drunk.

- Verse 18 is a proverb in accord with traditional wisdom: sloth and inactivity have bad consequences. Many proverbs address this issue (cf. Prov. 6:6–11; 10:26; 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; etc.). The two lines in v. 18 express the same thought. In ancient Israel roofs were covered with lime, which cracked with time and thereby allowed rain to drip into the house. Maintenance was thus essential. Neglect of maintenance would lead to the roof sagging and leaking; the wise person would be proactive in the maintenance of his house.
- Verse 19 speaks further of the great illustration of idleness — and perhaps the partial cause of the idleness — which is the inappropriate banqueting mentioned already in verses 16–17. The NIV does not translate it in the best way, however. A more literal translation is: “For laughter they prepare food, and wine that brings joy to the living; and money meets the demands of both.” The Teacher often uses the Hebrew word *kol* to express “both” of two options rather than a global “all, everything” (cf. 2:14; 7:15, 18). The implication is that money that may have been well used for “house repairs” has been squandered on partying.
- It is not surprising that verse 20 goes on to speak of cursing the king and the rich, for in a country governed in such a way, the temptation to indulge in such bad-mouthing would be great. Yet it is unwise in a corrupt state even to think such thoughts, for thoughts can easily spill out into words, and even words spoken in private may find their way back to the rich and powerful, who can do the subject damage.

## REFLECTION

- ◆ In this passage we have seen the Teacher stress how easily a little folly ruins the strength of wisdom. His main interest is the undervaluing of wisdom and the consequences of this. Wisdom and folly begin with “the heart” (10:2), and at the heart of human existence there are countless idols that beg us to value what we should not and to despise what is truly valuable. This begins when our heart’s greatest desire is oriented toward something other than God. We prefer to believe that we are capable of living in our own way, for our own desires, and on the basis of our own insights. Inevitably, this path shapes one’s words and actions in ways that resemble the description of the fool.
- ◆ **The ordinary fool** is characterized in our passage fundamentally as someone who is **lost, yet long-winded**. He talks a good game, but he does not know where the goal line is. The number of his words are in inverse proportion to the quantity of his knowledge. The Teacher contrasts the words of the wise with those of fools: their words “begin in foolishness, and their talk ends in wicked madness” (v. 13).
  - Jesus points out the same contrast when he says, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure" (Matt 12:34-35).
  - Of the two paths through life described for us in Psalm 1, the fool has chosen the second. He walks in the counsel of the wicked, he stands in the way of sinners, and his life is as insubstantial as a vapor of breath on a cold morning.
  - The fool walks in the way of evil people (Prov. 4:14)—the way of the wicked who will perish (Ps. 1:6).
  - As he does so, he talks incessantly. He “sits in the seat of mockers,” ridiculing those who take a different path (1:1).
  - He speaks wicked and deceitful words designed to wound and hurt the righteous (Ps. 36:3; 55:21; 64:3; 94:4) and to draw them away from the truth (Eph. 5:6; 2 Peter 2:18). He even babbles before God, thinking to be heard because of his many words (Matt. 6:7).
  - **We cannot underestimate the damage that a loose, foolish tongue causes. It can destroy confidence, tarnish reputations, spread rumors, and divide communities.**
- ◆ **The wise person**, on the other hand, **knows the way** on which he or she is walking and the destination that lies at the end of the road. That person does not know everything about the universe or even about God and his ways, but he or she “knows the way to town,” depending on God for direction and light for the path:
  - Make straight your way before me. (Ps. 5:8)
  - He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. (Ps. 25:9)
  - Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth. (Ps. 86:11)
  - Walk in the way of understanding. (Prov. 9:6)
  - Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John 14:6)
  - The righteous person also knows that “when words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov. 10:19). Jesus also has much to say about our speech. As we follow Jesus on the path of discipleship and grow in wisdom, we learn to use whatever words we can to speak good into another’s life, extending blessing to everyone around us.

◆ **In Jesus we find the “power of God and the wisdom of God”** (1 Cor 1:24), for in him are the “treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). True wisdom comes from Jesus, and in his word we find the solid rock on which to stand: “Everyone who *hears* these words of mine **and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24).

- It is as we stand on the rock of Jesus and his word that we learn to recognize and embrace wisdom, wherever it is found. Jesus warns his followers about the dangers of the future but promises, “**I will give you words and wisdom** that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict” (Lk 21:15).
- As Christ-followers we must consider carefully how speak. Too often our words break people down and negatively affect situations. This does not have to be so. The Spirit longs to transform our hearts and give us a new vocabulary. Instead of speaking harmful words we speak words that help; instead of cursing those around us, we bless them; instead of sharing earthly wisdom, we learn how to share words from God. We begin to speak life and power.

## DISCUSSION

1. What is the Teacher’s point in telling the story of the poor man who delivered the city? Is it still true today that wealth and social class are far more impressive to people, generally speaking, than wisdom — and that people will listen more readily to people of great wealth and high social class than to a poor but wise man? How do we feel about this?
2. Look at 10:1. How have you seen this principle (a little folly outweighs wisdom) in your own experience? When have you seen small foolish decisions bring damaging effects?
3. What is the Teacher saying in 10:3? How does the fool “say to everyone” that he is a fool? In new and unfamiliar situations, how can you spot the fool in the group? (Perhaps you have some personal examples).
4. Verses 12-14 contrast the words of the wise and the words of fools.
  - In what ways might speech be the truest indicator of whether someone is wise or foolish? How do you know the difference between wise speech and foolish speech?
  - What is the most important thing Jesus teaches you about words? When have you recently experienced the positive value of words?
  - We sometimes hear people speak or act as if words don’t really matter (*after all, “they’re just words”*). How would the Teacher (and the author of Proverbs) respond to this claim? Why do words matter?
5. Read 10:20. In what situations would this advice about our words apply today?
6. **Practice: A Blessing Day.** As you begin the day tomorrow, ask that your heart and mind may be filled with God’s overflowing love for people. Resolve to extend a blessing to the people you encounter—beginning with your own family. Your blessing may be an expression of appreciation or a word of encouragement. Speak your blessings in the faith that God uses words to touch the lives of others. At the end of the day, pay attention to the effects of this experiment on your own walk with Christ.