

The Danger of Foolishness

Let's turn together to Eccles. 10.

*As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. Eccles. 10:1*

A little foolishness can override a lot of wisdom. You can make a hundred - a thousand - wise choices and decisions, and one foolish decision can undo them all and haunt you for the rest of your life. When it comes to foolishness, a little goes a long way. It can hijack your reputation and be the thing everyone remembers you for. Some of you are old enough to remember Dan Quayle. Dan Quayle was chosen as George H W Bush's VP in August of '88. At that point Quayle was already a pretty accomplished guy, having earned a law degree, and having been the youngest person to be elected to the Senate from the state of Indiana, and then he made history again by being re-elected to the Senate by the largest margin ever to date in Indiana. Dan Quayle was the VP for four years. That is a pretty distinguished career. But for all of those impressive accomplishments, Dan Quayle is probably best known for the dumb things he said. There are websites devoted to Quayle's dumb quotes. Here are a few of them:

- *It's wonderful to be here in the great state of Chicago*
- *This President is going to lead us out of this recovery.*

He seemed to have a hard time recapping famous sayings.

- *If you give a person a fish, they'll fish for a day. But if you train a person to fish, they'll fish for a lifetime.*

There was a very famous advertising campaign promoting education that had the iconic saying: *A mind is a terrible thing to waste*. Quayle's mangled version of it literally reverberated around the world:

- *What a waste it is to lose one's mind. Or not to have a mind is being very wasteful. How true that is.*

For all his accomplishments, Quayle's reputation has been stunk up by a few dumb statements.

On a more serious note: consider Joe Paterno. Paterno was the respected and admired football coach at Penn State for 45 years, known as one of the winningest coaches in college football. Until it was discovered that he concealed facts relating to assistant coach Jerry Sandusky's abuse of young boys. He was dismissed before the end of the 2011 season and died in disgrace two months later. 45 years of a sterling reputation destroyed in a matter of days because of a terrible and foolish choice he made to protect a child abuser.

The point is, a whole lot of good can be spoiled by a little foolishness, by a bad choice, a lapse in judgment, or one act of wrongdoing. Chapter 10 is a warning about the danger of foolishness. This chapter is a collection of wise principles so it jumps around a little bit, but I think we can identify three overarching areas of foolishness we need to be careful about: The danger of foolishness in our walk, in our work, and in our talk.

1. The danger of foolishness in our walk

*The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left.*

³*Even as fools walk along the road,
they lack sense
and show everyone how stupid they are. Eccles 10:2-3*

The wise heart inclining to the right and the foolish heart inclining to the left is not describing one's political leanings. In the ancient mid-east the right hand was a metaphor for strength and honor. To sit on the right hand of an important person was the seat of highest honor. The left side symbolized stupidity, incompetence, and even perverseness (no offense to those of you who are left-handed). Jesus said on the last day when he separates the sheep from the goats, he will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

The point here is that wisdom and foolishness are diametrically opposed. Wisdom goes in one direction and foolishness goes in the other direction. Verse 3 says that for the fool, even walking along the road provides the fool a stage to display their foolishness on. Just attempting to walk along the road they *show everyone how stupid they are* -in other words, they may not be able to see it, but it's obvious to everyone else that they are foolish. Sometimes others can see us clearer than we can see ourselves. A good question for us to honestly ask ourselves is this: *am I wise or am I foolish?* When I come to a fork in the road, am I inclined to make the wise choice or the foolish choice? It's a good question, but there's a built in problem with asking ourselves that question: the fool always thinks they're wise. When a fool looks in the mirror, they see a wise person staring back at them. Self-deception is a part of their foolishness.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes...Prov. 12:15

Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes?

There is more hope for a fool than for him. Prov. 26:12

We won't find the answer by looking in the mirror. We can't measure wisdom and foolishness by how we feel. There are objective and tangible markers that tell us if we're being wise in how we walk or foolish.

- Prov. 9:10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Are we living in the fear of the Lord? Do we respect and reverence God in our daily choices and decisions? Is God's revealed will in the Bible our compass in life? Or are we doing what seems right in our own eyes?
- Do we hate evil and all of its fruit? *To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. Prov. 8:13*
- Do we seek and listen to good counsel? Prov. 12:15 says, *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes*, and goes on to say, *but a wise man listens to advice*. This can look two ways. If we refuse to listen to wise counsel, or we listen to it, and then ignore it because our judgment always seems better to us than anyone else's, we might be a foolish person. Are we humble and teachable and seek other people's input and genuinely listen to it?
- Are we growing in self-control (a fruit of the Spirit)? *A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Prov. 25:28*

- Do we give thought to our ways and plan ahead? *“The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps” Proverbs 14:15.*
- Do we let it rip when we're angry? *“Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end” Proverbs 29:11.* Anger, when it controls us, is really stupid. We do and say stupid things that seem right in the moment (because our anger makes it seem wise and right) and it does great harm to relationships.

We can't trust our own assessment of whether we are wise or foolish cause the bigger fools we are, the wiser we'll think we are but God's word gives us objective measurements to help us assess ourselves. God calls us to be careful to avoid foolishness and to walk wisely. ¹⁵*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,* ¹⁶*making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* ¹⁷*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* Eph. 5:15-17 Wisdom is always centered on our relationship with God, and our desire to follow Jesus, measured by objective obedience to His revealed will in the Bible.

2. The danger of foolishness in our work

A big part of our lives is our work. We were created to work, to be productive, to accomplish. When I use the word work, I don't mean to limit it to paid employment. Stay at home mom's work (and work hard!). People who volunteer their time to help others are working. Fixing up the home, or doing a project is working. Any area where we undertake a task and/or are responsible for something or someone is a type of work. And while work is designed by God to give us a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment, foolishness can present significant dangers to our work. He lists several cautions:

- a) Don't leave your post prematurely (vs. 4)

*If a ruler's anger rises against you,
do not leave your post;
calmness can lay great offenses to rest. vs. 4*

When your boss gets angry at you and things are going terrible and you feel underappreciated, you will be tempted to give up. Everyone of us has been tempted to give up on something - to leave our post, to quit - at some point in our lives. I know I have.

They say you should never make a life-changing decision in the midst of an intensely emotional time, whether it be a deep discouragement, anger, depression, frustration, whatever. People have made major changes such as quitting their jobs, leaving their families, moving out of state, breaking off relationships, or other major changes in the midst of emotional storms and then had to live with the consequences of their decision and sometimes a lifetime of regret. Keep calm and stay at your post - it's amazing what a steady hand can do to calm down the storms around them. Weather the storm, there will be better weather ahead. Don't leave your post prematurely.

- b) Don't get careless (vv. 8-9, 11)

*Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.*

⁹ *Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them;
whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. vv. 8-9*

*If a snake bites before it is charmed,
the charmer receives no fee. vs. 11*

Solomon gets really practical here - almost any job can be dangerous if we get careless. Pits need to be dug sometimes, but if you're not careful, you can fall into it. Breaking down a wall might seem harmless, but it was common for poisonous snakes to make their homes in the cracks and crevices of stone walls in Middle East. Quarrying stones or cutting lumber are good, productive jobs, but you can get hurt if you're not careful. Vs 11 describes a professional who rushes the job. Snake charmers working with poisonous snakes would gather crowds to watch them charm and handle the dangerous creatures. Many of them would travel from city to city with a basket containing a cobra. I watched a snake charmer sit a foot away from a basket containing two cobras. No thanks! Snake charmers took great care not to be bitten but if they hurried and misjudged, they elevated their risk of being bitten

I know that one day I will die. Three things about that day: first, I don't want it to be too soon, second, I'd like to go with a clear testimony of faith in Christ, and third... I really don't want to die doing something dumb! Like the poor guy who dropped his cell phone into a storm sewer and then in his attempt to reach in and get it, got stuck and ended up drowning. That is tragic, but it's also kind of a dumb way to die. Accidents happen, but some can be avoided with a little care.

c) Work smarter, not harder (vs. 10)

*If the ax is dull
and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed,
but skill will bring success.*

Stephen Covey tells the famous story in his book, 7 Habits of Highly Successful People, of the lumberjack competition that finally came down to two competitors, an older, experienced lumberjack and a younger stronger lumberjack. The young lumberjack was certain he would fell far more trees, especially as he could hear the sound of chopping stop at regular intervals from his older rival. He figured the old man needed to take frequent rests, while he could power through and keep chopping. He was surprised at the end of the day, however, to find that the older man had chopped significantly more trees. When he asked about the frequent pauses in his work, the experienced lumberjack answered, that's when I would rest and sharpen my axe.

Being productive in our work doesn't just happen by our working harder, we need to learn to work efficiently. It's wise to sharpen our axe regularly. Sharpen the axe by finding the right tool rather than powering through with the wrong tool. Sharpen the axe by taking time off to refresh yourself. Sharpen the axe by learning how to do your job more efficiently. Take the time to sharpen your axe.

d) Don't be lazy and self-indulgent (vv. 16-18)

*Woe to the land whose king was a servant^[a]
and whose princes feast in the morning.*

*¹⁷ Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth
and whose princes eat at a proper time—
for strength and not for drunkenness.*

*¹⁸ Through laziness, the rafters sag;
because of idle hands, the house leaks. vv.16-18*

The picture is one a lousy king and lazy princes who indulge themselves with feasting and wine first thing in the morning. Rather than rising early and working to be productive with their day, they get up and start partying. Princes were meant to rule and govern wisely for the benefit of their people, but these princes just live for their own pleasure. It's the picture of a wasted life and a devastated kingdom. Woe to the land...

Laziness tears lives and homes apart, not in a moment, but over time. The rafters start to sag, the house starts to leak, it's a picture of neglect. Laziness causes us to do what we want to do instead of what we ought to do and need to do. It's a picture of someone letting their life go to pot.

Laziness takes many forms but in any form it is hazardous to our lives. Flies start to pile up in the perfume cause you don't take steps to prevent it. The irony of laziness is that you do what you want to do in the moment, but increasingly find yourself bored and unhappy with your life. Which saps motivation to do anything productive with your life which makes you even more bored and unhappy with your life, which saps even more motivation to do anything productive with your life.

Blessed is the land - where the king is a man of honor, where the princes discipline themselves to eat at the right time, in order to do their job, not as a means of getting out of their job. Laziness is a dangerous thing and we should work hard to avoid it in our lives.

3. The danger of foolishness in our talk

One of the biggest places that foolishness leaks out of us is through the mouth.

*Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious,
but fools are consumed by their own lips.*

*¹³ At the beginning their words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness—*

¹⁴ and fools multiply words. Vv.12-14

The wise person speaks graciously. They may disagree, they may express strong convictions, but they are careful with the words they use. Paul says a similar thing in Col. 4:6 - *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

We've all known people who use words like a flamethrower - scorching people with their harsh and cutting words. Foolish people try to cut others down with their words. If you are constantly sarcastic with your words - I'm not talking about light banter or good natured busting on friends, but cutting people down with a thin veneer of humor - then you should ask the Lord to help you change your speech habits. Foolish words will eventually destroy the person who speaks them. Flamethrower words will burn our home down eventually; cutting words will cut our legs out from under us eventually; sarcasm will become

such an ingrained habit of how we relate to people, that we won't know how to be serious, or loving, or gracious with them. Someone once said that sarcasm is a substitute for intimacy. Sarcasm holds people off at arm's length. And often people use sarcasm to say what they mean under the disguise of humor, where they can retreat to "I was just joking!" if the other person gets upset.

Foolish words destroy the fool over time. But it's not just deeply ingrained patterns we need to watch out for. A few dead flies, a few foolish words at the wrong time can do great damage. Be careful.

One final caution Solomon gives us about foolish words: be careful not to say bad things about people even when you think it's safe to do so:

*Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,
because a bird in the sky may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say. Vs. 20*

We have a saying similar to this one: *a little bird told me*. We might think we're safe to revile someone (in this case the king, where it could cost a person their life), but it's not. There are ears all around. A bird might carry our words to the person we're talking about.

As Christians, we should be careful about what we say, even when we think we're out of the earshot of whoever we're talking badly about. Gossip is when we say bad things about someone when they're not around to hear or to defend themselves. We might think we have a circle of friends that we're safe to gossip with, but gossip is never safe. For one, it might get out and do a great deal of damage. Talking badly about others is also a bad character trait so remember, if you have friends that you feel comfortable trashing other people with, then chances are really good that they feel comfortable trashing you when you're not around. Fools consume themselves and each other with their words.

I want to close by repeating a verse I read earlier found in Eph.

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Eph. 5:15-17

God calls us to be careful to walk wisely, redeeming the time for the purposes of God. None of us are perfect, and thank God for His abundant forgiveness when we mess up, but a careless act of foolishness can damage our witness for Christ. A few dead flies can smell up a large container of perfume. We don't want people to be so focused on the foolishness in us, that they can't see Christ in us.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We can go to God with reverence and ask Him in prayer to help us see where we are being foolish. We can bathe our decisions in prayer and listen for the Lord's direction and guidance. We can prayerfully seek to align our lives with God's revealed will in His word. And yes, when we mess up and do something dumb, something foolish, something sinful, we can always go to Jesus and ask for his forgiveness and cleansing.

The End of the Matter
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Sin is inherently foolish, and Jesus came to die for sinners. Apart from Christ, I am a huge fool. So are you. Aren't you glad Jesus loves fools? But he also helps fools to change, and we can ask God confidently to help us grow in wisdom and avoid foolishness.

Let's pray.