

“WISDOM, FOLLY, AND RULERS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

August 7, 2022, 6 PM

Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

Introduction.

Qoheleth, the Preacher, King Solomon has been extolling the virtue of wisdom over everything else in this life under the sun. Seeking to become wise and mature in negotiating the ever changing and fleeting challenges of life has been his mantra.

But this is not as easy as it sounds, and the Preacher is not about quick or easy fixes. He has made much work of observing all of life from every angle and he sees contradictions, irony and paradox, as normal parts of life.

Happiness is vanity, fleeting, and yet happiness is the only thing a reasonable person can pursue in this life. Eat, drink and have pleasure and live as happily as you can while you live.

Toil is vanity, fleeting, what does it profit in the end, yet whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might.

Wisdom and folly are the same in the end, both come to the same end, yet wisdom is precious and to be pursued, it gives more strength than ten rulers.

He has explored what wisdom can and can't do in chapter seven, in chapter eight he reminded us of why we must remain humble regarding wisdom since our wisdom can't understand or comprehend God and His ways. Chapter 9 once again declares when all is said and done, wisdom is better than folly, every time, all the time.

Solomon has tried to make this point as clear as possible. To drive the point home we now takes out his hammer and a big fist full of nails to hammer the point home, 20 nails actually.

He gives us an onslaught of proverbial wisdom. These proverbs are meant to spur us on toward wisdom and away from folly. Solomon shows his wisdom in how he can see things in common, daily life and make moral and ethical applications from them. This comes off as a random sampling of practical advice, but in it is great wisdom.

Eccl. 10:1-3, Folly in general.

The first proverb starts us off with a bang. The problem with wisdom is there is always a fly in the ointment. Just a little bit of folly can topple it.

Proverbs 9:18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

One bad apple spoils the whole barrel.

A little leaven, leavens the whole loaf (I Cor. 5:6).

“It is a lot easier to make a stink, than to create sweetness” (Derek Kidner). One little lapse of judgment can foul a whole life. We all know the folly of a single reckless moment.

Wise men and women are always vulnerable, the smallest bit of folly can jeopardize all their wisdom. The wisest person exercising the greatest wisdom in the fleetingness of life is a fool if he thinks his wisdom will keep him from every trial, trouble or misstep. The wise person is always vulnerable, and he is wise if he knows that and is humble.

“A little folly in a wise man is far more visible than a little wisdom in a fool. The wise man has much more to lose” (DW).

Beware of little flies, a slip of the tongue, a sharp word, a rude gesture, a quick temper. Pay attention to the small things that can hinder your Christian testimony. How did the fly get in the ointment? Lack of care, lack of vigilance, lack of prayer and applying the Word.

The most difficult government in the world is self-government, self-control, self-discipline, self-denial.

Given both the superiority and vulnerability of wisdom, Solomon proceeds to commend wisdom and to give wisdom, and urge us to do the same.

Eccl. 10:2-3

MSG - Wise thinking leads to right living; Stupid thinking leads to wrong living.

This is not a statement about left and right-handed people or the bent of our politics. This is about people who go in the right direction and those who wander off in the wrong direction.

You can't hid wisdom and folly. Fools are high profile, you can see them a mile away. He can't walk down the street without advertising who he is. All of us by our words, actions, clothes, manners are broadcasting what we are.

Fools reveal themselves by their behavior. He doesn't follow the right paths. And worse yet he is clueless, has no sense he is a fool or how stupid he is acting.

And beware, our world often calls the fool wise and the wise a fool. A problem in our culture today is you can't judge anyone and their behavior. Everything must be regarded as acceptable. There can be no shaming of foolish or sinful behavior, no calling out of folly.

Eccl. 10:4-7, social folly.

We must use wisdom in all our relationships, and with rulers in particular (see Eccl. 8:1-5).

When you are in an angry, hostile situation, stay composed. Hold your ground, don't over react or get overly defensive or retaliate. Keep your head about you, keep your anger in check. Stupidity flows quickly and easily. You can defuse intense situations with self-control, maturity, calm. This is the power of wisdom over folly.

A gentle answer really does turn back wrath. Keeping your mouth shut keeps you out of a lot of trouble.

God doesn't spare us from bad leaders. God doesn't remove foolish leaders from our lives. And God doesn't give us immunity from being foolish in our own leadership. Being a Christian doesn't mean we aren't capable of folly.

Whether we are leading or following we are going to need much grace and wisdom.

Bad leaders will err in all kinds of ways, acting like they are superior to the rest of us, promoting the wrong people. Foolish leaders promote fools who join them in their folly.

There is evil when fools rule over the wise, and wise must submit to fools (see 9:13ff). This is one of those evils that makes life under the sun more difficult.

In our time and culture we think it is great when a slave gains his freedom and rises to success. And we think it's good when the rich are humbled and brought down to a low place.

But we shouldn't project our time to Solomon's. This is about misplacing people, about misgovernment, when those unfit are elevated. Slaves in this context is not the mistreated Black American. Here it refers to a criminal or debtor or prisoner of war. It is not wise to put these types of people in authority.

Solomon says he has seen when the proper order of things has been turned upside down, when those who shouldn't be in positions of power and authority are, and those who should be, are not.

10:8-11, six obvious, practical facts of life.

Here we are given six pithy lessons in how wisdom can quickly be undone, how just a little folly can bring down our efforts, our change of success when we aren't vigilant, paying attention.

We must apply wisdom in our work and daily activities. There is danger everywhere. There is no immunity from danger, no entitlement from trouble. Don't become injured because of poor planning, careless execution, thoughtlessness.

In life under the sun in a fallen world, painful things happen. We hit our thumb with the hammer, the ladder falls down, the machine jams and breaks, the lawn mower won't start, the toilet won't stop running. And hard work leads to calluses, cuts, bruises and splinters.

The fool doesn't have time to sharpen his tools. He takes short cuts that take twice as long.

A snake before it is charmed will bite. The fool doesn't bother charming his snake before he uses it. If you do the right work but at the wrong time, it is counter-productive.

Some think learning and training and reading the instructions are a waste of time, just go for it. You can charm the snake later.

They think short term and immediate success, not the long haul, and the patience of slow and steady wins the race. Immediate gratification rather than delayed gratification.

Spiritually we sharpen our edge with prayer and the Word of God, with a love for truth and the Gospel of Jesus. There is no substitute, neglect this and you will be spiritually weak and dull.

Eccl. 10:12-15, a fool and his mouth are soon in trouble.

We cannot gain too much wisdom regarding our speech, use of our mouth.

The tongue is a restless fire, many lives and many relationships are destroyed by the tongue. The wise man builds up with his words, the fool tears down with his words.

Loose lips sink ships, partnerships, friendships, courtships. The lips of a fool swallow him. A fool falls into his own mouth. Puts his own foot in his own mouth. The sins of the tongue are great and many, who can tame it?

There are lots of big talkers around, who love the sound of their own voice.

They use words to disguise their lack of knowledge.

Those who talk the most, usually have the least to say.

This is the one too smart to stop and ask directions.

They think they know it all, and can say what will be, they have the future figured out.

He can't tell the future but it doesn't keep him from trying or speaking as though he can.

A fool's words are bad from beginning to end. He begins in folly and ends in madness.

All of this taken together, 12-15, fools love to talk but not work.

Learn how to keep your words. Don't be hasty, don't be flippant, don't be cavalier.

The more one listens to God and God's Word, the less they need to spout their own.

Eccl. 10:16-20, more wisdom and folly about rulers, leaders.

Beware of leaders too young to have experience. Is youth always bad in leaders? No, there are exceptions to the rule. Josiah, king at 8. Simon Sefzik may be such an example, young and mature, wise beyond his years. The problem is not when the king is a child in age, but when he is a child in understanding and maturity.

But the general rule still applies. Youth lack wisdom. Especially youth who refuse to grow up.

Beware of leaders who waste their energies on wine, women and song, fast living. The wise know when to work and when to feast, and how to balance the two. The problem is not eating and drinking, but eating and drinking at the wrong time, and in wrong way, drunkenness.

Wisdom is doing the right thing in the right way at the right time. And it takes wisdom to now that. Wisdom shows itself in moderation and self-discipline and restraint. Folly is the opposite.

Happy is the land where wisdom prevails, where leaders are in the right roles.

Again, we see laziness and sloth lead to trouble. Nothing good comes from them. Through sloth the house crumbles and tumbles. Remember that apartment building in Miami. Neglect and lack of diligent lead to bad results.

As it is with the house, so it is with the soul. Procrastination leads to decay.

Who is doing the difficult work of fighting of sloth, laziness, indolence, who is doing the painful exercising of our souls, bending our stiff wills, overruling our rebellious temper, curbing our out of control appetites, taming our sinful passions, fighting against temptations and lusts?

Never expect spiritual wealth, while indulging sinful lusts and thoughts.

10:19

Commentators struggle to make sense of the final line.

Money in and of itself, of course contributes to our material needs and comforts. It provides us with a thousand advantages. Money may not solve every problem, and money can cause problems, but on the whole, many issues can be resolved at least in the short term with money.

It is a great grace and tool for much good. It is a great evil when it takes the place of God. It is seriously limited and it takes wisdom to know this. It cannot give us health, happiness or immortality. It cannot give us peace, it cannot save us.

10:20

This verse brings us back to the ruler and our mouth.

Here is the thing about us and rulers, about us and anyone in any kind of authority over us. It is a natural sinful tendency on our part to think we are wiser and better than those over us. And we are often all too happy to let others know.

A wise person is not just wise by what he says or thinks about those in power, but by what he doesn't say. As they say the walls have ears. Guard your tongue, especially around those in power.

Even our most secret thoughts and words have a way of becoming known, mostly because we foolishly let them out here and there. A slip of the tongue, a word on social media. One little lapse of judgment, and the vulnerability of our wisdom is exposed.

How many open/hot mics has gotten people in trouble? You never know where the little birdies are. And before you know it 60 Minutes or the Washington Post have a few questions for you.

Can wisdom protect you? Only if you are vigilant and diligent to protect wisdom, and you do that by being consciously aware of wisdom's limitations and vulnerability.

The thought that the king in heaven hears our every word, knows our every thought even before we think it, should give us pause to consider our thoughts and words. They are all known.

Conclusion and application.

Ephesians 5:15-17 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.

Jesus is our example of wise leadership and ruling. He is our perfect king.

Instead of promoting fools, He opposes the proud and exalts the humble, and sets an example. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. Jesus didn't take short cuts like Satan offered Him, but wearied Himself by taking the right path all the way to the cross. Jesus wasn't just big talk and no action. He kept His word, did everything He promised. And He knew when to be silent.

Everything the Preacher laments about leaders, Jesus doesn't do. And in all of our sinful actions, indulging ourselves, being slothful and lazy, demanding our way, talking big, multiplying words and sins, using time and gifts inappropriately, hurting others, cursing our rulers, and all rest of our folly, He pays in full with His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is the wisdom of God.