

Chapter 12: The Destructiveness of Folly

Ecclesiastes 10:1–20

In the second half of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher has been building a positive vision for life under the sun. He has insisted that wisdom has great value (Eccl. 7:15–29), that wisdom teaches us how to live when we are not in control (Eccl. 8:1–17), and that wisdom is better than control as it readies us for eternity (Eccl. 9:1–18). In Ecclesiastes 10, the Preacher approaches this issue from the opposite perspective: What is so bad about folly? Here, the Preacher insists that foolishness is damaging, especially for the fool. Most of all, the foolishness of a king is tremendously dangerous to the kingdom. The Preacher gives a somber warning in Ecclesiastes 10 that *leaky wisdom sinks a kingdom*.

The Crisis of Folly (Eccl. 10:1–7)

In the last verse of the previous chapter, the Preacher had written, “one sinner destroys much good” (Eccl. 9:18). That phrase functioned as a transition away from the theme of “wisdom is better” from chapter nine, to the theme of the destructiveness of folly in chapter ten. The first verse of chapter ten makes this point vividly: “Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor” (v. 1). The point is simple, that even a small amount of folly (like a few dead flies) can tarnish the good accomplished by wisdom and honor (which would otherwise be as sweet as a perfumer’s ointment).¹ The Scripture is filled with illustrations of this principle, in the destructive recklessness of Esau, the eventual collapse and disqualification of Moses and Aaron, and even in the direct admonition of Paul: “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6).²

Importantly, we should notice that the Preacher is not commending folly in verse 1—he never does—but simply pointing on one key vulnerability for the corruption of wisdom.³ The Preacher underscores this point in v. 2: “A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left.” The terms *right* and the *left* are universally understood as symbolic for good and bad, so that even the Latin terms for the *right* (*dexter* → *dexterous*) and the *left* (*sinister*) find their way into English to refer to someone who is skilled and someone who is evil, respectively.⁴ In the Bible, the idea of the *right* refers specifically to “strength, honor, and cultural appropriateness (Gen 48:13–18; Exod 15:6, 12; 29:20, 22; 1 Sam 11:2; Isa 41:10; Jer 22:24; Ezek 17:18),” while the *left* leads to “the opposite direction and away from those things.”⁵ As we have noted before, the “heart” does not so

¹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 334.

² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 88; Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 234.

³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 100.

⁴ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 238; Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 88–89.

⁵ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 170.

much refer to the seat of emotions, but to the place of our thinking: “Thus the proverb is making the point that the wise man is led in the right direction. He understands things properly and in their proper relation. As a result, his thinking does not lead him astray. The fool, on the other hand, (pun noted) does not understand the proper way of things. As a result, he goes wandering off in the wrong direction.”⁶

Indeed, the foolishness of the fool is so immediately apparent that he “says to everyone that he is a fool” whenever he walks down the road (v. 3). The *road* may refer literally to the way that a fool conducts himself while walking down the street.⁷ On the other hand, the idea of *road* or *way* or *path* (as the word דֶּרֶךְ [*derek*] is variously translated in the Old Testament) has a metaphorical meaning for the journey of life itself.⁸ Again, the point is that the fool exposes his own foolishness in everything he does throughout his life—even as he walks down the road.

In v. 4, the Preacher gives us a very practical case where wisdom and foolishness critically diverge: “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.” The presupposition here is, as the Preacher declared earlier, that the “word of the king is supreme,” so that it is not an option to ask, “What are you doing?” (Eccl. 8:4). As Roland Murphy writes, “At all costs, the courtier is to keep cool.”⁹ It does not matter whether or not the king is behaving rationally in his anger, for the important point is that “calmness will lay great offenses to rest”—that is, “the wise counselor must stand by his post even in the face of the king’s wrath over some offense and in so doing turn aside the king’s anger.”¹⁰

This wisdom to stay calm in the face of a ruler’s “great offenses” does not mean that the Preacher considers rulers to be infallible. As if to correct this potentially misunderstanding, the Preacher next describes a great error that he has seen under the sun that proceeds from the failures of the ruler (v. 5): “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” (v. 6–7). The effect of the foolishness of a ruler is to invert proper order in the world, so that folly is exalted, the rich are diminished, and slaves ride on horses while princes walk like slaves.¹¹ This does not describe the positive, healthy growth and development of those from low places upward, but an inverted, unjust situation that stems from folly and evil.¹² No matter how many ways a ruler’s wisdom may be like perfumer’s ointment, such reversals of justice are dead flies that give off a stench to corrupt that ruler’s kingdom.

The Consequences for the Fool (Eccl. 10:8–15)

The second section of this chapter gives more information about just how destructive folly can be. In v. 8, the Preacher writes, “He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will

⁶ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 135.

⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

⁸ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 240; Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 167.

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

¹⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 335.

¹¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

¹² Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 171.

bite him who breaks through a wall.” These verses clearly speak about negative consequences that result from specific activities, but there is an interpretive question about the intentions behind this work. So, Tremper Longman III notes that elsewhere, Scripture speaks of those who fall into the pits that they have maliciously dug for others to fall into (Ps. 7:15); however, Longman does not believe that this verse refers to any malicious intent.¹³ The parallel with Psalm 7:15, however, leads me to conclude that evil actions are indeed in view—to dig a pit for someone else (only to fall into the pit), and to attempt to break into someone’s home—only to be bitten by a snake. In both cases, the one who plots evil against others, receives that brunt of that evil himself.¹⁴

In this view, v. 8 stands in contrast with v. 9, where the activities *are* legitimate: “He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them.” If this is correct, then the Preacher is making two points. First, he is arguing that if you pursue malicious actions against others, you are at great risk of harm to yourself. Second, though, he is insisting against the conclusion that good, legitimate actions are thereby risk-free. On the contrary, the same kind of harm comes to the righteous and the wicked, the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, etc. (Eccl. 9:2).

So, if vv. 8–9 deal with the inherent dangers that may result from all kinds of activities, v. 10 deals with a different kind of risk: folly’s waste of energy and effort. The Preacher writes, “If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed” (v. 10). Gaining wisdom is like sharpening of an axe, making all of life and work simpler, less exerting, and more successful. The fool, on the other hand, lives by “superficiality and haste,” rushing into his work, where “a wise man prepares his tools.”¹⁵ Even if the fool does not fall into his own pit or suffer the bite of a snake, his work is doomed to frustration and futility because of his lack of wisdom.

The next four verses (vv. 11–14) deal with the words of the fool. Verse 11 is difficult to translate, and the ESV puts it this way: “If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.” A more literal translation might be, “If the serpent bites while not charmed, then there is not an advantage to the master of the tongue” (my translation). The final phrase “master of the tongue” may refer to the charmer of the snake; however, the Preacher seems to be expanding the figure of speech to encompass a broader principle. Namely, those who try to get through life by manipulating others with skilled speech will eventually encounter situations where their tongue will not be able to tame the danger in time to avoid the “snake’s” bite. Eventually, the fool’s foolishness will find him out.

The Preacher carries forward his point in vv. 12–14: “The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of a 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?” This fool who begins his words with foolishness (v. 13), and who multiplies his words in his foolishness (v. 14), will eventually consume himself with his words. The smooth-talking control he exerts over his words by deceit and manipulation will eventually run out when his speech is seen for what it is: “evil madness.” The wise man, on the other

¹³ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 244; cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

¹⁴ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 243–44.

¹⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

hand, deals honestly and graciously by his speech, so that his words “win him favor” (v. 12). Indeed, while the fool speaks only to control with the moment, the wise speaks with the future in mind, recognizing the uncertainty of what is to come after him (v. 14).

In the long run, the Preacher tells us that the fool is utterly lost in life, no matter how much his words may boast of a false confidence. Indeed, “The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city” (v. 15). Derek Kidner paraphrases this verse by saying that the fool “would get lost, we might say today, even if you put him on an escalator.”¹⁶ There is no hope for such a man who gives his life over to folly, for folly is thoroughly destructive.

The Catastrophe of a Foolish King (Eccl. 10:16–20)

In the final section of this chapter, the Preacher deals with the problem of the foolish king. He opens with a word of lament for nations under the leadership of immaturity: “Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!” (v. 16). Michael Eaton makes an important point about the word “child” here, by arguing that this word “refers not to age but to general maturity. In 1 Kings 3:7 Solomon considers himself ‘a child’ and recognizes his immaturity as a disadvantage to be remedied only by God-given wisdom.”¹⁷ The warning here is for a king whose immaturity permits his princes (i.e., advisors) to give themselves to feasting at inopportune times.

By contrast, v. 17 offers the positive vision for leadership: “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!” The contrast in these verses “conveys the idea that the king is fully in charge, that he lives up to the standards of a royal family, and is not a parvenu. The contrast between v 16 and v 17 lies in the style of the leaders, not merely in the age or lineage of the king.”¹⁸

Why is leadership such an important factor? The Preacher may hint at two reasons in the next two verses, although he does not explicitly connect these points with his concerns about the quality of the king. First, in v. 18, he writes, “Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.” If this is in reference to the king, then the implication here is that the king will “set the tone of a whole community.”¹⁹ If the king is given to sloth and indolence, the whole “house” (symbolic for a kingdom; cf. 2 Sam. 7:16) will leak. While some commentators reject the connection to the kingship altogether,²⁰ Duane Garrett observes that “The proverb of v. 18 can obviously apply equally well to the administration of the whole state and the private economy of one’s household.”²¹

The second possible statement about the kingship comes in v. 19: “Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.” At a general level, the Preacher is making a statement about the proper use of God’s gifts, as Kidner argues: “the point is not that every man has his price but that every gift has its use—and silver, in the form of money, is the most versatile of

¹⁶ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 92–93.

¹⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 155.

¹⁸ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

¹⁹ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 94.

²⁰ e.g., Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 155–56.

²¹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 336.

all...God’s wholesome gifts are good, and their proper use delightful and perfectly sufficient.”²² Still, we should perhaps note the connection of the bread and wine to the feasting of the princes, whether “in the morning” (v. 16) or “at the proper time” (v. 17). If the Preacher intends to give a further reflection on the kingship (which I am inclined to see), his point is that these gifts are indeed good and useful, but only when used in the proper way, or “at the proper time.” When they are misused (especially by feasts in the morning that interrupt proper work), these gifts are corrupted, and the effect is the deterioration of the whole “house,” making for a sinking and leaking kingdom.

The final warning the Preacher gives, though, cautions against cursing the king—even in one’s private chambers, and even in one’s thoughts (v. 20). The one who curses the king in absolute secrecy will find that “a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.”²³ This is an interesting point, since this section (or, at least, v. 16) has offered a sustained criticism of the kingship.²⁴ This is where the Solomonic authorship of this book is helpful to understand the stance the Preacher is taking. Solomon knows all too well *both* the unbridled power of the king against criticism and critique, *and also* the great destructiveness that a king can unleash on a nation by his foolishness.

Discussion Questions

1) Why does the Preacher think that a little bit of folly has a disproportionate effect to “outweigh wisdom and honor” (v. 1)? What does “right” and “left” mean in v. 2? How does wisdom lead us to strength and prosperity, and foolishness in the opposite direction? How exactly do people see the foolishness of the fool when he is walking down the road? Why is it such a dangerous thing for folly to invert justice (v. 5–7)? On the whole, why does the Preacher find folly so dangerous?

2) What negative consequences do fools experience as a result of their own folly (v. 8)? Still, how does the Preacher remind us that there is no way to guarantee good outcomes simply by avoiding folly (v. 9)? What negative consequences may await those whose folly is malicious (v. 10)? What all does the Preacher warn about the words of the fools (v. 11–14)? What does it mean when the Preacher writes that the fool “does not know the way to the city” (v. 15)?

3) What does the Preacher warn against when he describes a king who is a “child” (v. 16a)? Why is it such a dangerous thing for princes to “feast in the morning” (v. 16b)? Do you think v. 18 connects with the warnings about the king from vv. 16–17? Why or why not? Do you think v. 19 connects with the warnings about the kings from vv. 16–17? Why or why not? After all this, why is it still dangerous to curse the king (v. 20)?

4) If the Preacher has already commended wisdom, why is it so important for him also to warn us against folly? If we live in a world filled with vanity, how can we really avoid folly? Where do you

²² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 95.

²³ “A little bird told me’ is a proverb which appears in a variety of forms and cultures, including Aristophanes’ *The Birds* and the Hittite *Tale of Elkuhirsu*.” (Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 157.)

²⁴ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 178.

see your own tendencies toward folly? Which warnings from the Preacher resonate with you? What could be the consequences of your folly? What is the alternative to that particular kind of folly? How might the Preacher urge you toward greater wisdom?