



# Ecclesiastes

## (20) The Under-Valuing of Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 9:13 – 10:11

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This evening we continue our series of sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes. When we left off just before our vacation in July we had finished up to chapter 9:12, so we continue now at 9:13 and in this sermon we will go to chapter 10:11.

The section that we are going to look at this evening is quite positive about the importance and usefulness of wisdom while at the same time pointing out that it does not take much to torpedo the way of wisdom in any given situation. What seems to be a common thread in these verses from 9:13 to 10:20 is that wisdom is very important, but foolishness is very common, and a little bit of foolishness can undo a whole lot of wisdom. We will see throughout that the author of Ecclesiastes is recommending wisdom, but at the same time he is warning us that it is not a sure thing in life and that foolishness often prevails. 9:13 through 10:20 is a section in the book of Ecclesiastes, at least according to some commentators. We will cover the section in two sermons. This evening we will go as far as 10:11.

Now you may remember that the book of Ecclesiastes is often very dark and negative about life under the sun. In many places the author reflects a nihilistic perspective – which is to say that he likes to point out things in the world that seem meaningless and that do not seem to fit with the existence of a good and just God and that seem to contradict things that are taught in other parts of the Bible. The reason that this is so helpful is that that is the way the world sometimes looks to us and so

we can all identify with the author of Ecclesiastes to some extent in some of our moods.

And the author of Ecclesiastes does seem to reflect different moods. Sometimes he is more positive and other times he is more negative and what is so wonderful about that is that that too is what life is like and so Ecclesiastes is reflecting what life under the sun is really like. Sometimes it seems to make sense. Sometimes it does not. Sometimes it is obvious that God is ruling everything and sometimes the things that happen make us wonder how it is possible for there to be a good God in heaven. Ecclesiastes reflects what life is really like.

And it is significant that Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature in the Bible. It is biblical wisdom to recognize and to struggle with the complexity of life and the things about life in God's world that are puzzling and that do not seem to add up. For this is part of reality as we experience it.

Now in the section that is before us, the author of this book is in a little better mood, he is a more positive about the usefulness and importance of wisdom. There are places in this book where he says that wisdom makes no difference and that it is pointless. That is one of the things that puzzles him. In chapter 2:15 he writes, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?' And I said in my heart that this also is vanity." In the end wisdom makes no difference so why bother to be wise. That is a sentiment that he expresses a number of times in the book, but in this passage, he is more positive about wisdom. He is recommending it, but he also will not let us forget that wisdom is a fragile and undervalued thing in this world and foolishness often has the upper hand.

He begins by giving an example that shows that a great thing was accomplished by wisdom, but it was soon forgotten. The example is of a small city which was besieged by the powerful king. The powerful king did not win the day, however because there was a poor man in the city who was wise and by his wisdom the city was delivered. It is not said what happened and how the weak resisted the strong by wisdom.

He assumes that we will be familiar with this idea. It is expressed in other places in the Bible. Back in 7:19 he had quoted a proverb that made this same point. "Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city." There are many examples in history of this sort of thing whether in battles or in other situations. There are stories of people who overcame overwhelming brute strength by the use of wisdom.

But his point in telling the story is even though impressive things can be done by wisdom, people tend not to put much value on it and tend to forget it once the event has passed. Verse 16 "But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard." And the next verses continue this thought. Verses 17-10:1, "The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor."

Wisdom is like a perfumer's ointment, but a few flies in the ointment ruin it so that instead of smelling wonderful it stinks. So too, wisdom fights an uphill battle in this world. Wisdom is a powerful thing – it can accomplish great things, but it tends to be ignored and a little bit of foolishness can spoil the effect a whole lot of wisdom.

Now wisdom is important in the biblical teaching on the Christian life. The heart of foolishness is sin. Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord. Jesus came to deliver us from our sin and to change us so that we would fear the Lord and so that we would be truly wise. Jesus said that those who built the house of their life on his teaching are wise and those who did not are building the houses of their lives on sand and therefore are fools. He tells a parable of five wise virgins and five foolish virgins. Paul taught that the scriptures "are able to make [us] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 3:15)

Wisdom first of all means believing in Jesus and repenting of our sins, but it is also supposed to be demonstrated in our lives. It is in the light of this that we must understand the Old Testament teaching on wisdom. The wisdom teaching of the Bible does not only mean that we

trust in Jesus and embrace his salvation. It also means that we live our lives wisely. That means that living life skillfully is an important way that we glorify God and that means that how we navigate this life is important for pleasing God. We honor God when we reflect his wisdom in our lives and we dishonor him when we ignore his wisdom and think and act in ways that are foolish.

And these verses tell us that wisdom is often overlooked and neglected or spoiled by foolishness. The wise man whose wisdom saved the city was soon forgotten. Wisdom tends to be found where things are quiet, but people tend to give their attention to those who make lots of noise. So, we need to think about this if we want to be wise. Wisdom is found in quietness and thoughtfulness. Wisdom tends to be unassuming and modest. It is not showy and in your face. Wisdom is a powerful thing, but it is often overlooked and ignored like the poor man who by his wisdom saved the city but was soon forgotten.

So, these verses are telling us that if we want to be wise in living out the life that flows from salvation in Christ, we need to step back and be thoughtful about the nature and the value of wisdom. We need to value wisdom for living a life that is pleasing to God, and to do that we need to pay attention to the fact that foolishness tends to be loud and, in your face, and wisdom tends to be found in quietness and thoughtfulness and the unassuming.

Also, these verses teach that a little foolishness can undo a lot of wisdom. "One sinner destroys much good." "A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor." This is part of the nature of things in a fallen world. It's easier to run down hill than it is to run up hill. Wisdom is hard and slow, and its fruits take time. It takes many acts of wisdom to build a life that reaps the fruit of wisdom. But one act of foolishness can destroy a life that wisdom has built slowly and deliberately. It is easier to destroy than it is to build. And so, foolishness can do a lot of damage. This means that we must be very careful in living our lives. We must think before we act. We must get advice. We must listen to experience. In other words, we must be deliberate and intentional about seeking wisdom and avoiding folly. We must realize that foolishness comes a lot more easily than wisdom and a little folly can undo a lot of wisdom.

Next, we have two verses that give us more insight into the nature of wisdom and folly. “A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right and a fool’s heart to the left.” Here we have biblical justification for being a political conservative rather than a liberal. Actually, that is not true. I just couldn’t resist saying it. The terms “right” and “left” here do not mean what they mean to us when we use them to refer to conservatism and liberalism.

One obvious thing that this verse means is that the inner life of a wise man and a foolish man are pointed in completely different directions. The right is the way of success and wholeness and skill in navigating life while left is the way of mistakes and disasters and failure. Right, as this verse uses the term, is good and left is not good.

The whole idea of wisdom is based on this contrast between wisdom and foolishness. And that contrast is based on the antithesis that runs through the whole Bible between the followers of God and the enemies of God. There are two ways to live according to the Bible – the way of life and blessing and the way of curse and death. We see this antithesis in Jesus’ teaching about wisdom as well when he contrasts the wise man who built his house on the rock of Jesus’ teachings and the foolish man who built his house on the sand of any other way of understanding and living life. The house of the wise man stood firm and the house of the foolish came tumbling down.

This verse also teaches that both wisdom and foolishness are matters of the heart. The heart in the Bible is our inner man – it is who we really are – it is the center of our thinking and our valuing and our deciding and our loving. This points to the fact that there are two kinds of hearts in this world. The human race is divided up between people whose inner essence is pointed towards wisdom and people whose inner essence is pointed towards foolishness. Jesus speaks of this reality when he says that “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”

Those last words of Jesus express the same idea that we find in the next verse, verse 3 of Ecclesiastes 10, “Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.” That does not

mean that the fool walks down the road, saying, "I am a fool." It means what Jesus says when he says that out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. Our speech identifies us as wise or foolish. Fools declare to all that they are fools by the things that come out of their mouths. Our words reveal what is in our hearts. And so, if you want to know whether you are a wise person or a fool according to the Bible, pay attention to your words.

And the key of course is whether our words reflect the beginning of wisdom which is the fear of the Lord. Hearts that fear the Lord speak words that reflect God's interests and God's priorities as those are revealed in the Bible. The words of fools reflect a spirit of independence from God and his interests and priorities and so they reveal hearts that are living apart from God and focused on themselves and interests and priorities that are not rooted in God's word.

The next section consists of verses 4-7. One subject that comes up a number of times in the larger section from 9:13-10:20 that we are considering is kings and rulers. There is an interest in rulers who are often not wise and there is an interest how to survive in the presence of volatile rulers. And that is relevant for us in two ways. We live under rulers even though we live in a completely different political system and what the wisdom literature of the Bible says about rulers can give us perspectives on the rulers with whom we have to do. And it can also help us to relate skillfully with employers or government officials who have authority over us.

So, verse 4 says, "If the anger of a ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest." This is a bit of wisdom on how to deal with someone who has authority over you who is angry with you for some reason. Wisdom calls for calmness. Not stomping out of the room. Just sit there and listen and keep calm. This person has the power to negatively affect your life. Do not aggravate the situation further, by getting angry or by being mouthy. Sit there and listen and be calm.

Wisdom deals with this sort of thing. Wisdom relates to the great questions of life, whether or not we love and serve God, but it also deals with how to get along with your boss and how to relate skillfully to

government officials or police officers who have the power to make your life difficult or who have the power to make your day go better. Living life to the glory of God involves acting wisely in how we relate to all kinds of people including those who have power over us. The principle here is found elsewhere in expressed in a more generalized way when we read in Proverbs 15:1, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” That is always wise counsel. But it is even more so when the person who is angry with you has the power to negativity affect your life.

However, the thought of angry rulers reminds the author of Ecclesiastes of another mystery about life. Verses 5-7, “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.”

Now to understand what he is saying here, we must understand that he is accepting the normal social order. The enlightenment had not happened yet. Nor had the invention of a relatively flat social order. In his world the rich tended to govern and slaves tended to walk rather than ride horses. Actually, it is still true that the rich tend to govern. But for the author of Ecclesiastes the social hierarchy was part of the nature of things and the way that things ought to be. And so, it troubled him when the normal roles were reversed.

He says that it is an evil when “folly is set in high places, and the rich sit in a low place.” In this verse the rich were the ones with the experience and education for wise government. They should be governing, but often there are fools in high places. And slaves on horses while princes walk on the ground like slaves. The social order is turned on its head. And Ecclesiastes sees that as a great evil. One of the things that is wrong under the sun. One of the things that troubles him about life under the sun. This perspective on life is also taught in Proverbs 19:10 which says, “It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury, much less for a slave to rule over princes.”

Now this is not the kind of text to guide us in our thinking about things like equality or the rightness or wrongness of the social hierarchy. The Bible tends to apply its principles within existing social structures and

over time those principles have an influence in the world. Certainly, the Bible is not concerned about equality in the way that modern liberals are concerned with equality. The Bible is concerned about justice and fairness, but it does not define those like the liberal ideology does in terms of equality.

What this text is concerned about is when the social order is turned upside down and society is in chaos. As one scholar has written, “it is an instance of the world upside down, a pattern of inversion or chaos that is found throughout the world from ancient times to the present.” This is what the author of Ecclesiastes sees as a great evil. Times of instability and upheaval in which fools are ruling and the most qualified rulers are on the sidelines. This is a world in which folly is having too much influence and as a result the world seems to be up-side down.

I think that we can identify with this sentiment in our time. There are many fools in high places. Especially if we define a fool as one who does not fear the Lord. And as far as the social order is concerned, because of the foolishness of our culture as a whole, there are many fools who are famous and held in high regard like many movie stars and singers while there are many people who are truly worthy of respect and even wide recognition who are ignored. Ecclesiastes point is that wisdom does not always win the day. Foolishness has tremendous influence. Things are often the opposite of how they ought to be. And the point for us is – the world as it is does not work as it should. And that is a great evil.

The next few verses describe more situations in which the world does not work as it should. Bad things happen to people who are just going about their work. Someone digs a pit and falls into it. Someone is breaking down a wall and gets bitten by a snake. Someone quarries stones and they fall on him and someone is splitting logs and they may fall on him. These are observations about life and they have to do with life not working the way it should. These are part of Ecclesiastes dissatisfaction is the world as it is. And it is part of his overall perspective that life under the sun – that is life that does not take God into account – is meaningless and futile. These verses reflect the pessimism that he has expressed many times throughout this book.

Then we have a number of nuggets of wisdom. Verse 10, “If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed.” This verse is interesting because it shows the nature of wisdom. It is an observation about life. If you axe is dull you have to work a lot harder to cut down the tree. Wisdom makes that observation and sharpens the axe. This is how wisdom works. It notices things and makes necessary adjustments.

Verse 11 is another example. “If a serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.” What then should the snake charmer do? He should make sure that the serpent is charmed before trying to handle him. Again, wisdom is about noticing things and conforming ones’ actions to reality. A fool just keeps on hacking away with a dull axe and has to work twice as hard to cut down the tree and a fool tries to handle the snake before it is fully charmed and gets bit. Wisdom is working with the grain of reality and conforming your actions to it. Fools are too impatient to take their time and do the job right.

I’m going to stop there. There is too much left in chapter 10 to summarize quickly and there is enough there for another sermon.

What the verses that we have covered do is give us a taste of wisdom in the Bible. We have seen that wisdom is important, but it is often ignored. Foolishness is loud and impulsive. Wisdom is quiet and unassuming. Wisdom does not impress foolish people because it is not theatrical and ostentatious. Foolish people are attracted to glitz and glamour and not to quiet perceptiveness and unspectacular prudence. That is why wisdom is often forgotten and ignored.

There is a vast divide between wisdom and foolishness in the world. The Bible divides us all up between the foolish and the wise. Ultimately it has to do with our hearts and in the storyline of the Bible, salvation in Jesus Christ gives people new hearts so that they are inclined to wisdom which is the right way while the unsaved are inclined to foolishness which is the way of brokenness and death.

But wisdom is also about skill and competence in living life. It is rooted in the fear of the Lord, but the fear of the Lord makes skill in living possible because it helps us to see reality as it is. Wisdom observes

things. It is troubled when things are not as they ought to be, but it ends up where Ecclesiastes ends us in living in the light of the judgment of God when all things will be made right. In the meantime, the wise person seeks to learn from his observations of life so that he conforms his life to the way things really are. And that gets down to things like sharpening your axe when it is dull and waiting for the snake to be charmed before you grab it.

Wisdom is patient. Wisdom is thoughtful. Wisdom is observant. Wisdom adapts to reality rather than butting his head against it. No matter how much it might be satisfying to do so, do not tell your boss what you really think. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. That is the nature of things in God's world and the wise person conforms to the way things really are and is rewarded for doing so.

The truth behind all of this is that how we live matters to God and not only the big things, but also how we deal with angry bosses or dull axes. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and one of the fruits of wisdom is that you sharpen your axe instead of hacking away with a dull axe. Sharpening your axe is pleasing to God. Acting like a fool is not even when it comes to cutting down trees.

So, seek wisdom. Value it even though it is less flashy than what fools value. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of your sins and change your oil on time. Please God by learning to conform to the nature of things as he made the world to work.