

Life is Hard: Harder when you are a Fool

9.27.26

Message 10

Ecclesiastes 9:17–10:20 (CSB)

¹⁷ The calm words of the wise are heeded
more than the shouts of a ruler over fools.

¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one sinner can destroy much good.

THE BURDEN OF FOLLY

10 Dead flies make a perfumer's oil ferment and stink;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

² A wise person's heart goes to the right,
but a fool's heart to the left.

³ Even when the fool walks along the road, his heart lacks sense,
and he shows everyone he is a fool.

⁴ If the ruler's anger rises against you, don't leave your post,
for calmness puts great offenses to rest.

⁵ There is an evil I have seen under the sun, an error proceeding from the presence of the ruler:

⁶ The fool is appointed to great heights,
but the rich remain in lowly positions.

⁷ I have seen slaves on horses,
but princes walking on the ground like slaves.

⁸ The one who digs a pit may fall into it,
and the one who breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.

⁹ The one who quarries stones may be hurt by them;
the one who splits logs may be endangered by them.

¹⁰ If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen its edge,
then one must exert more strength;
however, the advantage of wisdom is that it brings success.

¹¹ If the snake bites before it is charmed,
then there is no advantage for the charmer.

¹² The words from the mouth of a wise person are gracious,
but the lips of a fool consume him.

¹³ The beginning of the words from his mouth is folly,
but the end of his speaking is evil madness;

¹⁴ yet the fool multiplies words.

No one knows what will happen,
and who can tell anyone what will happen after him?

¹⁵ The struggles of fools weary them,
for they don't know how to go to the city.

¹⁶ Woe to you, land, when your king is a youth
and your princes feast in the morning.

¹⁷ Blessed are you, land, when your king is a son of nobles
and your princes feast at the proper time—
for strength and not for drunkenness.

¹⁸ Because of laziness the roof caves in,
and because of negligent hands the house leaks.

¹⁹ A feast is prepared for laughter,
and wine makes life happy,
and money is the answer for everything.

²⁰ Do not curse the king even in your thoughts,
and do not curse a rich person even in your bedroom,
for a bird of the sky may carry the message,
and a winged creature may report the matter.

Introduction

A. Story

1. For those of us who grew up in the 1990s (as the kids say today, "Did you grow up in the 1900s?"), one of my favorite shows was Boy Meets World.

2. One day, the main character (Cory) is getting advice from his older brother, Eric.

The advice?

Life's Tough; get a helmet.

Then he smacks him in the forehead.

3. If you wanted to know what it was like to grow up in the 90s, that captures a compelling picture.

B. Solomon said something similar, except he used terms like wise and fool.

1. Or for those of you born in the 1900s, "I Pity the Fool."

2. These verses don't tell a story so much as they provide guidance for the journey.

C. Wisdom provides guidance for the day-to-day journey of life.

1. It isn't a GPS that takes you to the exact spot, but more like a rural person giving you directions to get you somewhere close.

2. This wisdom provides guidance for our lives.
3. For example, notice verse 2.

Ecclesiastes 10:2 (CSB)

² A wise person's heart goes to the right,
but a fool's heart to the left.

D. This has nothing to do with politics.

1. It has nothing to do with right-wing conservatism or left-wing liberalism.

2. The right refers to strength, power, authority, and blessing, while the left means you are going the wrong direction.

3. The wise person is going in the right direction with their mind, their will, their emotions.

- a. They are thinking about things that matter, that honor God, and that result in blessing.

- b. True wisdom isn't only having the body do the right thing, but the heart as well.**

4. The foolish person's desires are toward those things that take them in the wrong direction.

- a. To know the right direction, and to go that way, is to be wise.

- b. To go in the wrong direction, either on purpose or by accident, is to be foolish.

- c. Ecclesiastes goes even further, and says even when the fool is walking on the right road, his heart lacks sense, and his foolishness is evident.

- d. It is this public example of foolishness that stands out in today's text.

5. Our foolishness eventually becomes noticeable.

- a. What is done in secret will eventually be known in public.

- b. Who we really are will become known.

Fly in the Ointment Vs. 1

A. Solomon is recalling a process and a smell that everyone back then knew.

1. In a world with little bathing, perfume was an antidote to the stench of life.
2. Without modern trash facilities, sewage, and refrigeration, the ancient world didn't smell like ours.
3. Perfume was expensive and valuable.

B. But all it took to ruin a batch of perfume was a fly.

1. A dead fly in ointment or perfume causes a scum on the top of it and ruins the whole bottle. The Hebrew reads literally "fly of death" so it may even envision a poisonous fly. The point is, an ounce of folly can ruin a pound of Wisdom.¹
2. "The more delicate the perfume, the more easily spoiled is the ointment. Common oil is not so liable to injury."²

C. Solomon's lesson is that it only takes a little folly to undo wisdom and honor.

1. What is acceptable for a non-believer is not acceptable for a believer.
2. What is acceptable for someone who attends church isn't always acceptable for a deacon or a pastor.
3. This may seem unfair, but it is the nature of spiritual leadership.
4. The more that is given, the more that is required.
5. One author said: "So the higher a man's religious character is, the more hurt is caused by a sinful folly in him. Bad savour is endurable in oil, but not in what professes to be, and is compounded by the perfumer ("apothecary") for fragrance."³

D. It doesn't take much foolishness to undo years of great example.

1. **Will Rogers:** *"It takes a lifetime to build a good reputation, but you can lose it in a minute."*

¹ Ben III Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 69.

² A. R. Fausset, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Job-Isaiah*, vol. III (London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.), 537.

³ A. R. Fausset, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Job-Isaiah*, vol. III (London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.), 537.

2. Warren Buffett: *"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."*

E. Wisdom calls out to us and says, “think about it!”

1. It might not even be a sin issue.
2. “some of the most important choices in life are not between good and evil but between wisdom and folly.”⁴
3. Some of us are making decisions that might not keep us out of heaven, but will impact our effectiveness and opportunities.
4. And it only takes a little sin, a little foolishness, a little discretion, that can ruin the whole batch.

The wise are concerned with reputation, refusing to spoil what is good with our presence.

The wise are also prepared and know when to act.

Sharp Axes and Charmed Snakes

A. Verses 10 and 11 portray the wise person as prepared.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 (CSB)

¹⁰ If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen its edge,
then one must exert more strength;
however, the advantage of wisdom is that it brings success.

Ecclesiastes 10:11 (CSB)

¹¹ If the snake bites before it is charmed,
then there is no advantage for the charmer.

B. Wisdom slows down and prepares

1. I was taught growing up that a dull knife is more dangerous than a sharp knife.
2. A dull axe makes an effortful job even worse.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 232.

3. A wise man sharpens his axe before starting the job.
4. Today, wise people sharpen the skills and gifts God has given them before trying to use them.

- a. Education

1. Formal and Informal education has never been more accessible.
2. If we aren't growing, we are dying.
3. Read, study, replace some scrolling with podcasts, whatever it may take.
4. Education sharpens the axe.

- b. Experience.

1. Education must lead to action and gaining of experience.
2. This applies to the material world and the spiritual.

- c. Prayer

1. Prayer is one of the greatest tools God has given humanity.
2. To pray and to immediately have an audience with the King of the Universe is unlike anything.

- d. Fasting

1. Fasting is a powerful way to sharpen the axe.
2. For example, physical fasting makes is more sensitive to the work of insulin in our bodies.
3. Fasting makes us more sensitive to the voice and leading of God.

5. All of this takes time.

- a. It takes time to sharpen the axe, clean the gun, learn the skill, gain the experience.

b. “Living wisely may take more time at the beginning, but it saves time in the long run.”⁵

C. Wisdom seizes the opportunity and doesn’t delay.

1. Snake charming was common among Middle Eastern countries.
2. They believed they could gain control over snakes with a mix of skill and magic.
3. But if the snake bites first, the skill and wisdom doesn’t matter.
4. What does this teach us?
 - a. First, if a skill is required, then it needs to be applied at the right time (before the snake bites)
 - b. Second, some skills aren’t useful and helpful.
 1. What value was there to being a snake charmer?
 2. Solomon is thinking there is no real value.
 3. And if the snake was hidden and bit you, then all the skill doesn’t matter.
5. Wisdom values what is useful, beneficial, and necessary.
 - a. We live in a world full of knowledge, but some of it isn’t worth knowing or studying.
 - b. For example, here are some college courses offered at major universities:
 1. The joy of garbage
 2. A Symposium on the Career of Whoopi Goldberg,
 3. Zombies in Popular Media
 4. The Art of Walking
 - c. What if we are living in an age with more information and knowledge than ever before, yet have never been more foolish?

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 239.

d. Our foolishness is usually revealed in our words.

Undone by our words

Ecclesiastes 9:17 (CSB)

¹⁷ The calm words of the wise are heeded
more than the shouts of a ruler over fools.

Ecclesiastes 10:12–15 (CSB)

¹² The words from the mouth of a wise person are gracious,
but the lips of a fool consume him.

¹³ The beginning of the words from his mouth is folly,
but the end of his speaking is evil madness;

¹⁴ yet the fool multiplies words.

No one knows what will happen,
and who can tell anyone what will happen after him?

¹⁵ The struggles of fools weary them,
for they don't know how to go to the city.

A. What we say matters.

1. The Book of James reminds us that the human tongue steers, sets forests aflame, and is the hardest part of our lives to control.

2. Even as someone who has been a Christian and a pastor for a long time, my greatest struggle is to be a person who is gracious in speech.

3. Because the Fly in the Ointment for many of us is our attitude, expressed in our words.

a. Maybe you don't cuss anymore.

b. But you gossip, slander, or are just downright hateful.

c. Let's be honest: Christians can be some of the rudest, most hateful people.

B. The world can't hear the Gospel through our foolishness.

1. There is a theologian that all my professors talk about who died in 1968.
 - a. He was brilliant in ways I cannot grasp.
 - b. And while he was writing some of the most profound Christian theologies and dogmatics in history, he moved his mistress into the house with him and made his wife put up with her.
 - c. For decades, he lived a life that was publicly Christian while also living in sin, and everyone knew it.
 - d. When he comes up in my studies, or someone asks me about him, my reply is this: I can't take his Jesus seriously.
2. When the people closest to you listen to you, can they take your Jesus seriously?
 - a. Is there anything in your speech or conversation that makes people want to hear more about Jesus?
 - b. Is there anything in your character that causes people to wonder what makes you different?
3. Ecc. 10:12 sounds a lot like Proverbs 18:7

Proverbs 18:7 (CSB)

⁷ A fool's mouth is his devastation,
and his lips are a trap for his life.

- a. Are your words setting a trap for your life and future?
- b. Part of being wise is to not say foolish things.
- c. I think one of the things we can all do to better our influence is to be wise with our words.

How do we become wise?

Fear of God is the beginning of Wisdom

Proverbs 1:7 (CSB)

⁷ The fear of the LORD
is the beginning of knowledge;

fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Proverbs 9:10 (CSB)

¹⁰ “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

A. The fear of the Lord has two sides:

1. For the believer, it is a healthy and proper respect and reverence toward God.
2. For the unbeliever, someday that fear will be the terror of judgment and punishment.
3. Amazing how the same God can invoke different responses from people.
4. The difference is in relationship.
5. I like what Warren Wiersbe said:
6. But the fear of the child of God is not so much “Will He hurt me?” as “Am I going to grieve Him and hinder His work?” Our disobedience grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30)⁶

B. Where does this kind of Godly fear come from?

1. This kind of wisdom and knowledge is not something you accomplish but is “a gift of God that...must be sought.”⁷
2. Jesus said it like this: Matthew 13:44 (CSB) ⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field.
3. In Jesus’ parable, the man didn’t deserve the treasure.
 - a. He found it, and he found it by accident.
 - b. But the treasure wasn’t his, because the field wasn’t his.
 - c. Yet, it was within his reach to buy the field IF he sold all he had.
 - d. He didn’t borrow, trying to own both.

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Truth on Its Head: Unusual Wisdom in the Paradoxes of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 6.

⁷ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 263.

e. He didn't mortgage what he had, playing both sides.

f. The cost of the treasure was the forsaking of all that he had previously owned.

C. **Godliness, Wisdom, and the Fear of the Lord will cost you everything.**

1. Jesus is not fire insurance, hedging your bet to not go to hell.
2. Jesus is not another farm, another kingdom, you can add to your previous kingdom.
3. Jesus is not a superhero you only call upon when you need a miracle.
4. The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge, and without Him you are a fool.

D. Jesus is worth the price!

1. The reward is beyond comparison.
- 2.

What does this look like?

A. **Check for flies.**

1. Is there unrepentant sin in your life?
2. Are there attitudes or behaviors that are causing your witness to stink?
3. Are you compromising in areas that are causing the perfume to stink?
4. If so, you need to get alone with Jesus and confess and pray for strength.

B. **Sharpen the axe.**

1. Maybe you have been at this a while, but everything feels harder than it should.
2. Sharpen the axe.
3. Schedule a time, a place, and a conversation with Jesus.
4. Fast, pray, worship, walk, be silent, all the things.

C. **Kill the snake.**

1. If you know there is something in your life with the potential to bite you, be proactive.
2. Deal with it.
3. If it is sin, stop entertaining it and pretending that you can charm it.
4. I have this under control are usually the last words of foolish men.

D. **Live your life in the Fear of the Lord.**

1. I was at a funeral of one of my friend's fathers.
 - a. He was a hard-working veteran, had served in law enforcement, while raising his children in a poor household outside of Bakersfield.
 - b. At his funeral, the son-in-law shared some wisdom man had given him decades before.
 - c. "Your love for your wife won't always keep you pure, but your love for Jesus will."
2. This man knew something we forget.
 - a. Ecc. 9:16a: "Wisdom is better than strength."
 - b. The foolish person says they can handle it all.
 - c. The wise says, it's only by God's strength I can make it."
3. Discipline, determination, and strength are important, but they aren't enough.
 - a. But when we love and fear the Lord, that is the strongest motivator in the Universe.
 - b. There have been times when it has been the Fear of the Lord that has kept me going in the right direction.
 - c. Love, emotions, and motivation fade, but my desire to honor the Lord keeps me going.
4. If your love for Jesus isn't what is carrying you, be careful.
 - a. Jesus, when He was in the Garden modeled this for us:
 - b. Take this Cup, he cried, but not my will but yours be done.
 - c. This is the example before us.

Prayer