

### Works and Words of the Fool

#### Ecclesiastes 10

*Ecclesiastes 10:1-4 – “Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor. <sup>2</sup> A wise man’s heart is at his right hand, but a fool’s heart at his left.*

*<sup>3</sup> Even when a fool walks along the way, he lacks wisdom, and he shows everyone that he is a fool. <sup>4</sup> If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post; for conciliation pacifies great offenses.”*

#### Background Notes

Ecclesiastes is not the easiest book in the Bible to understand and interpret. However, if we keep two significant points in mind, it will greatly help us in our understanding and in interpreting of this book.

**a. Always keep in mind the complete theme of the book of Ecclesiastes** - and thus the perspective of the author in any particular passage. Is Solomon speaking from “under the sun,” where life is meaningless since it is apart from divine revelation? Or has Solomon brought in the divine perspective, from “above the sun”?

**b. Always keep in mind the structure of the book.** Knowing the structure of the book is so important for understanding and interpreting Ecclesiastes. We don’t have to wait until the end of the book before we get the divine perspective and Solomon’s conclusions. Rather, his conclusion surfaces in part throughout the book, whenever Solomon brings in the divine “above the sun” perspective.

The full conclusion for the life of the believer from this book could be stated as follows:

- Fear God.
- Keep His commandments.
- Live joyously.
- Remember the judgment.

**c. Know the correct concept of truth.** One more point that will help in understanding and interpreting Ecclesiastes is knowing the correct concept of truth. Would you agree that some things are more obviously true than others? For example, as I look around at my audience this morning, I can make two true statements. 1- Everyone in this audience has a seat. 2 - Everyone in this audience this morning looks nice. I think all of us would agree that number one is *more obviously* true. Both statements are true, but number one is *more obviously* true. (Some of you might even argue that the second statement is not completely true!) [laughter]

Here's the point. Everything in the book of Ecclesiastes is true, but some things are not as obviously true as others. Again, the proper perspective must be taken into account. Is the viewpoint from "under the sun" or "above the sun?" But even with the divine perspective, some things in Ecclesiastes are not as obviously true as others.

For example, in chapter 10, after he has observed the results "under the sun," Solomon gave us the divine perspective of the contrast between wisdom and folly. Verse 4: "*If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post; for conciliation pacifies great offenses.*" I realize there are various translations of that verse, but the point is that the wise reaction or response to your boss's temper and an angry outburst is not to quit or resign hastily. Better to be patient and weather the storm, because if you quietly submit, you may keep your job when you could have been fired.

So verse 4 is a general truth concerning the path of wisdom - but it may not seem to be *obviously* true, especially when you're in a position where it would be a lot easier to quit in a huff or react with a (justifiably) angry response.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The works of a fool defeat the value of wisdom

In the last verse of Ecclesiastes 9 we read: "*Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.*" One simple fool destroys much good.

That point is illustrated in the big word picture of Ecclesiastes 10:1 – "*Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor.*" It doesn't take much folly to nullify the hard-earned benefits and beauty of wisdom.

The "right and left" of verse 2 are not political positions, but right hand and left hand. As the right hand is generally more dexterous and the left more awkward, so the wise person generally knows the right course of action, whereas the fool generally fumbles the assigned job - even simple tasks like walking along the road (v3).

Verses 5-7: "*There is an evil I have seen under the sun, as an error proceeding from the ruler:* <sup>6</sup> *Folly is set in great dignity, while the rich sit in a lowly place.* <sup>7</sup> *I have seen servants on horses, while princes walk on the ground like servants.*" In these verses we see that the value of wisdom can be defeated when fools get into office and places of power. Consider the foolish behavior of some of our politicians.

Verses 8-10 indicate that wisdom is very important in everyday activities. Foolish decisions as to timing or procedure can defeat the value of wisdom - sometimes with disastrous effects: "*He who digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever breaks*

*through a wall will be bitten by a serpent. He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits wood may be endangered by it."*

Verse 10: *"If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success."* How many have had the experience of chopping wood with a dull axe? Did you foolishly keep on chopping? Or did you wisely take time out to sharpen the axe?

Verse 11: *"If the serpent bites before being charmed, then there is no profit for the charmer."* This is an ancient way of saying, what good is it to lock the barn door after the horse is gone? In fact, that's exactly the way the Living Bible paraphrases this verse!

So, in verses 1-11 we've seen how foolish actions can nullify the benefits of wisdom. The works of a fool defeat the value of wisdom.

## **2. The words of a fool defeat the value of wisdom**

Verses 12-14: *"The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up; <sup>13</sup> the words of his mouth begin with foolishness, and the end of his talk is raving madness. <sup>14</sup> A fool also multiplies words. No man knows what is to be; Who can tell him what will be after him?"*

What a difference there is, between the words of a wise person and the words of a fool! The words of the wise are gracious and few. The words of the fool, on the other hand, are endless, worthless, short-sighted, and ignorant. The fool not only puts his foot in his mouth, he doesn't even realize it!

Verse 15: *"The labor of fools wearies them, for they do not even know how to go to the city!"* If you ever have to stop and ask for directions on a trip, you'd better hope that you don't ask a fool for help. You may get a lot of words, but you'll probably get lost.

Verses 16-19 contrasts good leadership and bad leadership: *"Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! <sup>17</sup> Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time— for strength and not for drunkenness! <sup>18</sup> Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks. <sup>19</sup> A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers everything."*

Good leaders do not feast when work needs to be done, but fools party all the time. They're characterized by empty words (v13-14), inexperience (v16), irresponsibility (drunkenness) (v17), negligence and laziness (v18), and thinking that money is the answer to everything (v19).

Verse 20 tells us that if you're wise, you'll be very careful of what you say and where you say it! *"Do not curse the king, even in your thought; do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice, and a bird in flight may tell the matter."* The surest way to start a rumor is to tell folks something confidentially, and ask them not to tell anyone else. Wait and see – it won't be long before everyone knows your secret. Illustration: "Did you know that we may move to Florida? But keep that confidential, okay?" Believe me, it won't be long before someone who is not here today will ask me when we're moving to Florida!!

Needless to say, fools are not very careful of what they say and where they say it. The words of a fool defeat the value of wisdom.

## Practical Application

### **Don't let your conversations go downhill.**

In this chapter, Solomon repeatedly mentioned that the words of fools are not only endless and empty, but their many words consume them or swallow them up. *"The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up" (v12).*

In what ways do the words of a fool consume him? Did you ever notice how conversations go downhill, if wise safeguards are not used? Unless definite attempts are made to wisely control the comments and keep them pure, it will foolishly go downhill.

Before long the foolish people will be consumed or swallowed up with their many foolish words. Because of our sinful nature, that's just the way it is. If you don't believe me, become a silent listener to the conversation of a group of unbelievers at the office. Or take a look at some of the extremely foolish comments that follow many internet articles. If safeguards are not put on conversations, they will go downhill.

It should be different when we, as believers, are part of the conversation. Colossians 4:6 says that our conversation should be "gracious" and "seasoned with salt."

Don't let your conversations go downhill!