

## **An Empty Life? (12): Wise Words for Life**

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If you'd turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chapter 10, this has been summer with Solomon here at First Presbyterian Church. The Book of Ecclesiastes on Sunday mornings, Song of Solomon on Sunday evenings, and, bless their hearts, the singles in the Crossroads Class have been studying the Book of Proverbs. They've been "Solomoned" to death this summer, but I hope we've gotten some wisdom out of all of this.

Solomon, who calls himself The Preacher in this Book of Ecclesiastes, has been pressing home a very sobering message. His basic message is that life is meaningless. Now, that's a fairly dramatic and drastic way of putting things, but he's attempting to force us to think about something that we may, in fact, inoculate ourselves against. There are all sorts of people around us, especially in a place like First Presbyterian Church, that really believe what the Choir just sang. And so, it's hard to get yourself really into the mode of thinking what life without God would be like. And Solomon is saying in essence that life without God, life without a real saving knowledge and relationship with and of God is empty—it's meaningless; it's vain; it doesn't make sense; it's for no end or no purpose--there's no sense to it all. He wants you to feel the force of that; and so throughout this book, he's arguing at you to make you think hard about what you think about life, and how you're living your life. He says that there are all sorts of ways that people attempt to find meaning and satisfaction in this life while actually living as if there were no God. And he argues that they never really find meaning or satisfaction. He says that some people try to find, create meaning in life by being smart. They try and think about it a lot, and they try and think themselves into a meaningful life. And he says, "It can't be done." And he said there are other people who attempt to pleasure themselves into a meaningful life, a satisfying life. They seek the way of pleasure to provide them satisfaction in this life. Then there are others who seek the way of their vocation, or the way of their family, or the way of money and things and affluence. And he says that all of those ways fail to provide meaning for life. You can't get meaning out of life from those things. The only place you find meaning in life is with God. And he's been giving for the last several chapters other reasons why this is the case. He's asked us to stop and think about those horrible, difficult circumstances that come into our lives in this fallen world. He's asked us to think about those things that catch us unexpected that turn out lives upside down and throw us for a loop--those

things that leave us gasping for breath and feeling like we can't go on and that the lights are never going to come on again. And then he's even asked us to think about death. He says the wise and the fools all die. We're all going to face death in this fallen world. All of these are arguments for why life without God is meaningless. He's continually breaking up ground to show you that you can't live this life and have meaning without the one who created this life and gave it meaning.

And then he comes to chapter 10. If you've read ahead, you're sort of scratching your head and asking, "Solomon, did you blow a gasket?" We were talking about it earlier. It's that non-linear thing coming in again. OK? We're talking about a fairly defined subject; we're talking about life being meaningless without God, and suddenly we get this chapter full of Proverbs. What's going on, Solomon? Well, we'll try and explain today. Let's hear God's word in Ecclesiastes, chapter 10, beginning in the first verse:

Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so, a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom *and* honor. A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but a foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left. Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone *that* he is a fool. If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses. There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an arrow which goes forth from the ruler--folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. I have seen slaves *riding* on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land. He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen *its* edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; the beginning of his talking is folly and the end is wicked madness. Yet the fool multiplies words. No man can know what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not *even* know how to get to a city. Woe, to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time--for strength and not for drunkenness. Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. *Men* prepare a mal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.

Amen. This is God's Holy and inspired, inerrant Word. May He add His blessing

to it. Let's pray.

*Father, give us wisdom to understand Your wisdom in this chapter in this great book; to understand the great message that is here for us. By Your Spirit, pierce our hearts and convict us of our own folly. Show us the way of true wisdom, which is trust in Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.*

“Solomon, have you forgotten what we were talking about?” There are lots of Roger Nicole stories. There's the story about the guy who used to sleep through his class at Gordon Conwell Seminary. Dr. Nicole always had somebody close class in prayer, and the idea was that you had to close class in prayer sort of summarizing some of the thoughts about God that you had learned that day. So, about halfway through the class, they punched the guy and he wakes up and they say, “Dr. Nicole asked you to close class in prayer.” And he stands up and he starts praying this long prayer and then he sits down again, and Dr. Nicole says, “Thank you, brother, for that wonderful prayer. We will now continue class.” And he went on. But the funniest story is that Dr. Nicole has narcolepsy and he sometimes falls asleep while he's lecturing. It's happened both at Gordon Conwell and at RTS, Orlando. He'll fall asleep and then some brave student will go up and nudge him awake, and when he wakes up, he starts lecturing in French. And nobody has any idea of what he is saying and they say, “Dr. Nicole, English please.”

Maybe you feel that way about Solomon. “Hello! Lights on. What are we talking about here?” What does chapter 10 have to do with what we've been talking about in chapters 1-9? Suddenly we get this unassociated list of parables and proverbs. What are we supposed to do with this? How does this fit with the flow of argument? What is this non-linear Solomonic logic here? No, this is not like Dory, who suffered from short-term memory loss, in *Finding Nemo*. Solomon is not having a senior moment here; there is actually method to his madness. He's telling you this for a reason. He's telling you these proverbs for a reason. This whole chapter, though it may seem like a rambling set of unconnected proverbs is actually a meditation on folly. The whole chapter is a meditation on folly, on foolishness, on what it means to be a fool, and that actually factors into his argument. The argument that he's been carrying on from chapter 1 to chapter 9, because the fool looks at life in the wrong way, and the wise man looks at life in the right way. The fool looks at life apart from the living God, and the wise man looks at life through the lenses of the world that has been created by the living God. So, there's a reason that he pauses here and speaks about folly.

### **I. A little folly can do a lot of damage.**

“Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.” This is a comparison between wisdom and folly, and if you put an *as* in front of the first phrase to go along with the *so* in front of the second

phrase, you'll see that this sentence is a comparison. "As dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor." It's a proverb, probably like the one your parents or grandparents have said to you upon occasion when you were hanging out with a *bad egg*, which is another metaphor. But the proverb goes like this: one bad apple ruins the barrel. Well, it's not unlike that particular proverb, but it's actually packed with meaning, and I want to point out two things that it highlights. First, it reminds us that our character has a fragrance. In this passage the wise man's character, wisdom and honor, is compared to perfumer's oil. But, the fool's character is compared to dead flies. The point is, of course, that wisdom shows. Our character shows, or, to use the particular sense being emphasized here, you can literally smell character. For the wise man, it's a glorious fragrance. But for the foolish man, it's putrid, like dead flies. That's one of the messages of this proverb.

But the main message is this: a little folly can do a lot of damage. Don't underestimate folly. A little folly can do a lot of damage. A small mistake can mess up a wonderful reputation. A lot of us have appreciated the man who has collected the books of virtues. And we've appreciated his moral advocacy in the nation, on the political, social, and cultural front, but we were greatly disappointed when we found out that Bill Bennett was a gambler, and had in fact lost millions in gambling debts. It hurt his reputation. Now, he explained that his wife knew about it and his church didn't condemn it, but it hurt his reputation. He's had to hire a team to rehabilitate his reputation in the community. Before the election, when George W. Bush was eventually made the President of the United States, you may recall just a few weeks before the election, a DUI came up that had occurred 20 something years before. He had hid it from everybody, even his staff members didn't know about it. He was ashamed about it, and yes, his opponents were attempting to make hay with it, and they almost did. You see, he was running in contrast to the previous occupant of the White House and saying that he was going to come in and there would be no more of the shenanigans such as you had experienced over the last eight years. And a dead fly almost ruined the perfumer's ointment.

Or maybe it's the State of the Union reference to Iraqi attempts to procure nuclear materials from Africa. Sixteen words have cost a lot of late nights and sleepless hours in the White House over the last six weeks, I assure you. Or maybe it's closer to home. Our junior senator who was ready to be the leader of the Senate of the United States. One comment at a birthday party about another senator, and suddenly, he's out, out of power. Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor. You see, the point is the ruining or spoiling power of folly and foolishness. Solomon is telling you, "Don't make light of folly. Folly can cause trouble." Yes, sometimes, folly goes un-judged in this life and wisdom goes unrewarded in this life, but folly can cause big trouble, and it can ruin the reputations of wise men. That's the first point of this chapter, and then he goes on to work out for us a survey and consideration of folly. And look how he argues.

**II. Folly is a heart problem, shows in character and conduct, is found in high places, has consequences, is especially apparent in speech, and laziness, and has dreadful effects on a nation.**

In verses 2-20 he argues that folly is essentially a heart problem, that it shows in our character and conduct, that it is found in high places, that it has consequences, that it is especially apparent in speech and laziness, and it has a dreadful effect on a nation. He says seven things about folly in verses 2-20. Look at verses 2 and 3. Here he says folly is derived from a fault in the heart. A wise man's heart directs him towards the right, but a foolish man's heart directs him towards the left. Now, it's tempting, on the one hand, for those of us who may be a little more politically conservative to see this as a very prophetic insight from Solomon on how you should all vote, but that's not really what he's getting at. Nor is this an anti-left-handed person proverb. No, what is the right hand? What is the right arm? It's the place of honor and preferment and power and privilege. And the wisdom of the heart leads the wise man there and the fool away from it.

You see, the point here is really about where the heart is leading you. When you think "heart" don't think about what we Americans think about heart. When we think "heart," we think emotions. But biblically, the heart is not simply the seat of our emotions and affections and desires. It's the seat of our thinking and willing. It is the mental, moral, and desiring focus and source for our life. It's the inner man that Solomon is speaking about. And he's saying that the wise man's heart, his inner man, including his mind and will and affections, lead him to the place of honor and favor and protection; whereas, the fool's heart is the thing that leads him astray.

A fool's character shows, he goes on to say in verse 3, even when he's walking along a road. You see, that's a theme throughout Ecclesiastes. You can tell a fool by his actions. He's noisy; he likes shallow laughter and rowdy songs. He says that in chapter 7 in verses 5 and 6, he's lazy. Chapter 4, verse 5. You'll see it again here in chapter 10, he talks way too much. Chapter 5, verse 3, he's irascible; he gets angry easily. Chapter 7, verse 9, he doesn't receive good advice. Chapter 9, verse 17, he's morally blind. In chapter 2, verse 14, you can tell the one whose heart is filled with folly. So folly is derived from a fault of heart.

Then in verse 7 he goes on to say that folly is found in high places. Look especially at verses 5-7. This is his main point. I wish I had time to explain verse 4, and also verse 20 and a couple of others, but I'm going to zero in on the main lessons here because of the little time that we have together.

In verses 5-7, he makes his main point: You can folly in high places. You can find people in very powerful positions—even kings and leaders who are essentially foolish—while you find men with resources who are wealthy and wise and hard

working and nobody is listening to them. They're not in a position of leadership. And he gives this illustration. I've seen fools riding horses and wise men walking. It was an image that came out of the culture. Only the wealthy and important rode horses then. And those who weren't wealthy and important walked. And he's seen the situation reversed where those filled with folly were dwelling in the high places. I imagine that it scandalized the old German aristocracy to see Adolph Hitler leading one of the proudest cultures ever to grace Western Europe. I'm sure it was a great frustration to them. I'm sure it scandalized the old French aristocracy to see Napoleon, an illegitimate corporal from the French Army, rise to be the emperor of France. I'm sure it scandalized them. And Solomon too, has seen fools in positions of power.

But he goes on back to his main point in verses 8-11 and he says, yes, folly has consequences; even though you may see folly in high places from time to time, don't think that just because some of the foolish do well that there is no fall out to folly. And he gives some examples. In verse 8 he says one thing that you can tell about a fool is that he's vindictive, but sometimes his own vindictiveness comes back to bite him. "He who digs a pit may fall into it. A serpent may bite him who digs through a wall." Here's a man who is digging a pit to trap somebody, and he ends up falling into it himself. Here's a man who is breaking into a wall into his neighbor's house and while he's breaking through the wall, a serpent bites him. His own vindictiveness gets him into trouble because he's foolish. Vindictiveness has its own inherent dangers and penalties.

And then in verse 9, Solomon speaks of the inherent dangers of even normal labor. It requires a person of wisdom and prudence to navigate these normal dangers in quarrying stones and splitting logs. And verses 10 and 11 indicate the way that fools are so quick to go about their work. They are so hasty in their work that they don't do adequate preparation for it, and so he mentions the fool chopping with a dull axe. What does the wise man do? He sharpens the axe before he begins to chop; he works smart--not hard. The fool is bitten by the serpent, and he doesn't deal with the serpent in a timely manner. The wise man prepares and he saves strength and effort; he works smart. He is prepared. He's vigilant, and the fool is not.

Then in verses 12-14, he says that folly shows itself in our speaking. The character of one's speech is an acid test of wisdom. Words can swallow us up, Solomon says. In James' epistle, Jesus often made that same point. Foolish talk, he says in verse 13, flows from inner character deficiency, and it results in an irrational morality. Nevertheless, in verse 14, the fool keeps on talking. His verbosity and his prognostications about things that he could not possibly know about are for all to see.

Then, in verse 15, folly shows itself in laziness; laziness that eventually incapacitates. "The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city." He gets tired in his labor, so he stops going into the city to trade

or to sell or to buy—to do business transactions. And so he forgets how to get there. Everybody knows how to get into the city, but the fool forgets how to get there. He's incapacitated by his own laziness.

And then in verses 16-20, he comes back to speak again about folly in high places, and he says yes, you see folly in high places. But let me tell you this. "Woe to the nation that has folly in high places." It's a curse on the whole nation. You see, in all these ways, he gives us an anatomy of foolishness.

### **III. Application.**

Why does he say all these things? Well, there are a lot of reasons; we've already hinted at one of the reasons he does this, but let me give you seven things that he wants us to get out of this meditation on folly.

First of all, he wants us to seek wisdom. He wants us to seek after wisdom, to desire wisdom, to see that folly is dangerous and so to seek wisdom.

Secondly, he wants us to determine to be discerning about wisdom and folly. Not everybody we meet is wise; not everybody we meet is filled with folly, and so, we need to be discerning. He wants us to cultivate discernment between wisdom and foolishness.

Thirdly, he wants us to cultivate wisdom. We don't just one day wake up smart and wise. We can become wise by being around those who are wise—by learning and reading the wise. He wants us to cultivate wisdom.

Fourthly, he wants us to look at life from the vantage point of the wise, rather than from the vantage point of a fool. Now we're getting back to what he's been talking about in chapters 1-9.

Because, fifthly, he wants us to remember that ultimate folly is living life without God; it's the ultimate folly. And so, he wants us to look at life from the vantage point of the wise, so that we will not cultivate the ultimate folly by attempting to live this life without God.

Sixth, instead, he wants us to trust in God rather than our wisdom. And you say, "Where do you get trust in God rather than wisdom in this passage?" Well, several places. One is in his observation that wisdom doesn't always mean that you end up in the high places and folly doesn't always mean that you end up in ignominy. Sometimes, fools rule. Therefore, if your trust is in wisdom, you're going to be disappointed.

What's his point? In the very first verse he says that a man can live a generally wise life and mess up but one time, and it can cause a lot of trouble. You see, if

your trust is in wisdom, you're in trouble. Your trust needs to be in God. You want wisdom and you want to live wisely, but don't trust in wisdom, trust in God. In fact, we trust in God and not in our own wisdom; we run to Christ who is our wisdom.

Seventh, we reject the so-called wisdom of the world and we embrace the wisdom of God. What is the wisdom of God? Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the foolish of the wisdom of the world? For since the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the word preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised things God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He might nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Now, that's the message of Proverbs and all the wisdom literature in Ecclesiastes. You'll see it at the end of this book. He'll say it. True wisdom begins, not with the trust of our wisdom, but in trusting God and His promises through Jesus Christ.

May God grant us that kind of wisdom. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, teach us the wisdom of Christ and of His cross. It may look ridiculous to the world, but it is your wisdom for salvation for those who believe. Give us that faith. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen*

## **A Guide to the Morning Service**

### **The Call to Worship**



Biblical worship is always a response to God's gracious revelation of Himself to His people. He takes the initiative to come to us in grace and seek us out, before we ever respond to Him. Hence, all our worship services begin with a scriptural "call to worship" (that is, the content of the "call" comes from God's own word quoted and pronounced by the minister). In this "call" we are reminded that God always takes the initiative. He always comes toward His people first, in grace. Our worship is a reflexive response to His gracious call.

### **The Reading of Scripture**

We are currently reading through the Book of Acts during our morning services. Today's passage (Acts 16:22-40) recounts Paul and Silas' beatings by order of the Philippian magistrates and the marvelous conversion of their jailer (as well as his and his whole family's consequent baptism). Paul told Timothy "give attention to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13) and so, at virtually every morning service, a minister reads a substantial section of Scripture.

### **The Introduction of New Members**

During the morning services, a group of new members will openly confess their trust in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior of sinners, as He is offered in the Gospel. They were received by the Session on August 10. This Sunday they are presented to the congregation. Listen closely to the five questions of membership. They beautifully summarize key points of Christian faith and discipleship. And be sure to welcome these brothers and sisters, heartily.

### **The Prayers**

The ministers who lead in prayer during worship here at First Presbyterian seek to fill their prayers with Scripture and assist the congregational prayer to God by praying from the heart to the Lord. We do not write out prayers and read them, or simply re-use set forms, nor is our public prayer without forethought. We practice studied prayer. We usually outline our prayer beforehand and then pray by memory and heart. Through each of the two main prayers today (the opening "Prayer of Adoration and Invocation" and the "Morning Prayer"), the ministers will cover the main points of prayer: adoration, confession, assurance of forgiveness, thanksgiving, intercession, and supplication.

### **The Presentation of God's Tithes and Our Offerings**

We believe that the Bible teaches that Christian giving is an act of worship (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians 16:2), and so we give back to God His tithe and our offerings over and above, Lord's Day after Lord's Day. You will be happy to know that a large proportion of the money given to First Presbyterian Church goes directly to the support of benevolences, missions, campus ministry, evangelism, and church planting.

## The Hymns

### *Come, Thou Almighty King*

We open our worship today with a trinitarian hymn of praise. Terry Johnson says: From its earliest days the church understood that God had revealed Himself as both unity and diversity. God is one. Nothing could be clearer from Scripture. But God is also three—the names, works, attributes, and honors of God are shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus in the one God there is a trinity of persons. The three persons of the Godhead are “the same in substance, equal in power and glory” (the Westminster *Shorter Catechism*, Q.6). The doctrine of the Trinity is the centerpiece of Christian theology, and a defining doctrine of orthodoxy. “It is only when we contemplate this Trinity that we know who and what God is,” said the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck.

### *All Authority and Power*

A great missionary hymn, to accompany the reading of a great missionary text (Acts 16).

### *Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners!*

We respond to today's New Testament reading with this great hymn. After seeing and hearing Jesus' searching judgment in today's New Testament reading, we need these words. What better hymn could be named to emphasize the Gospel message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?

### *Trust and Obey*

One could hardly envisage a better three-word summarization of the Bible's teaching on sanctification than “trust and obey.” The words of this great old hymn are the perfect accompaniment to sanctified common sense wisdom imparted in Ecclesiastes 10.

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