

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 19

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Ecclesiastes chapter 10, is another collection of proverbs. As such, any outline is going to be somewhat artificial. In any event, I will group the text under five, very loose, headings. First, vulnerability, in vv. 1-4, second, inversion, in verses 5 through 7, third, accidents, in verses 8-11, fourth, fools in verses 12 through 15, and fifth, kings, in verses 16 through 20.

I. Vulnerability

First, then, we have vulnerability. Dead flies make a perfumers oil give off a stench, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. You have a lovely, sweet-smelling batch of perfume, but it only takes one dead fly in there to ruin it. The nature of wisdom, as we have seen, is that it is easily subverted.

There is a wonderful film from the mid-nineties with William Hurt and Harvey Keitel called *SMOKE*. It's a film which resonates deeply with the grand themes of Ecclesiastes. The story centers on a smoke shop in Brooklyn where the main characters converge and smoke cigars. And there is a wonderful scene where William Hurt is smoking a cigar and telling a story about how Sir Walter Raleigh discovered the weight of smoke. Everyone is, of course, puzzled about how he did this, and Hurt, puffing his cigar says: first, he weighed his cigar before he lit it, then he smoked the cigar, carefully preserving all the ashes. When he was finished he then weighed the ashes. You take the weight of the original cigar; you subtract the weight of the ashes and, presto, the weight of smoke!

It's a very Solomonic experiment. All of life is lighter than smoke, its weightless vapor. It's insubstantial mist. But in our text here we learn something distressing. As light as the smoke is, not all of it is weightless. It turns out that folly is **WEIGHTER, HEAVIER**, than wisdom. There is a word-play in the text on the idea of weight. The word for honor is the same as the word normally translated glory. And it is a word which has the idea of weightiness, as in C.S. Lewis's work "The Weight of Glory." Folly is the heaviest component in the smoke of life. In modern terms, one bad apple spoils the whole bunch. A little arsenic ruins a perfectly good glass of water. So, even a little folly – one rash act, one harshly spoken word – can outweigh **MUCH** wisdom and honor.

The reverse, in a fallen world is, unfortunately, not true. You can't redeem a bucket of dead flies with a little perfume, or a bucket of rotten apples with one good one. The bent and twisted world is biased against wisdom. The preacher then turns to a piece of conventional wisdom in v.2. A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. This is not, as I hope is obvious, a reference to our political system, where left and right as points on the political spectrum come from the time of the French Revolution.

The right in scripture, as in the right hand, is the place of power and honor. Jacob crosses his hands to bless Ephraim with his right hand in Gen 48. Jesus separates the sheep on his right, from the goats on his left. The point here is simply that wisdom and folly are antithetical. In v.3, we see that even when a fool walks on the road, he lacks sense. Meaning, literally, he lacks "heart." His heart, his desires are disordered. The result is that he announces to everyone that he is a fool.

The theme of vulnerability returns in v.4: If the anger of the ruler arises against you, do not leave your place. For calmness will lay great offense to rest. A gentle answer turns away wrath. With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue may break a bone. One angry person is always better than two.

II. Inversion

Our second point is inversion. And by this I mean something of a political revolution. The preacher says there is an evil he's seen under the sun, an error proceeding from a ruler. So, the source of this evil is the leader himself. As Mark Twain said: suppose you are an idiot. Suppose also you are a member of Congress – but I repeat myself. But it is, tragically, often the case that evil proceeds from the top down. Here the leader is a revolutionary idiot. He's one little dead fly, but He inverts the basic order of society. Folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.

The assumption here is that the rich, or well-educated, are generally prepared to lead. Here fools rule and competent rulers are displaced. Verse 7 continues the inversion: I have seen slaves on horses (which were costly signs of military might), and princes walking on the ground like slaves. Revolutionaries are usually fools. And fools are often revolutionaries. They always want to start history, like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or the French Revolutionaries, all over from year zero. They delight in inverting the inherited order. Thus, wisdom, even centuries of cultural wisdom, is vulnerable to one bad ruler who can destroy a country's heritage in a way ordinary citizens cannot. As Bob Dylan once said: steal a little and they throw you in jail, steal a lot and they make you king.

III. Accidents

Our third point is accidents, in vv. 8-11. Verse 8: he who digs a pit will (the verbs here could be translated as “may”) – he who digs a pit MAY fall into it. Accidents happen, and when they do, they can undo a lot of wise labor. A serpent will (or may) bite him who breaks through a wall. Orchards and vineyards in Israel often had stone walls around them. And if you need to tear one down, you better be careful.

Verse 9: he who quarries stones is hurt by them and he who splits logs is endangered by them. All action in a fallen world entails risk. But the preacher is not trying to instill paranoia. His point is that one oversight, one unwise move, can ruin a project or even endanger your life. Wisdom is vulnerable to dead flies. Plan the project out carefully to the very end.

Verse 10, continues the log-splitting theme: If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength. Which, presumably, puts you at more risk of injury. But wisdom, the text says, helps one to succeed. Meaning, sharpen the blade in a timely fashion. Here, as we’ve seen previously, wisdom is about proper timing.

The preacher returns to snakes in v.11. If the serpent bites before it’s charmed. Snake charming was a practiced art, and still is in many parts of the world. And the problem here is another timing problem. The snake bites before it’s charmed. And the preacher, in what has to be a piece of dry understatement, says: if this happens, there is no advantage to the charmer. This is a piece of biting irony! A series of little things causes much good to unravel.

IV. Fools

Our fourth point is fools. Here we have some very conventional, proverbs-like, wisdom. Verse 12: the words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. A fool’s mouth is ungracious and, thus, it is his ruin. And, since folly’s specific gravity is greater than wisdom’s, the next few verses show the downward spiral of the fool’s tongue.

Verse 13: The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. The more he talks the worse the stuff he says gets. But, he keeps going. In v.14 we’re told: a fool multiplies words. Plato once said: A wise man speaks because he has something to say, fools speak because they have to say something. The fool does not believe Jesus’ warning that we will render an account for every careless word we speak.

At the end of v.14 the Preacher tells us, for the fifth time in the book, no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him. Apparently, the fool is presumptuous and prattles endlessly about the future.

Finally, in v.15, we see the fool is lazy. Real work, as opposed to cheap talk, wipes him out. His incompetence, which is revealed in his speech, is seen in that he does not know the way to the city. This is an idiom for incompetence. He doesn't even know the way to the city, is the equivalent of our "he doesn't even know enough to come in out of the rain." What we have here is a man who can be completely overwhelmed by nothing.

IV. Kings

Our fifth and final point is kings. Political folly is never far from the surface in this chapter, and the Preacher returns to it in v.16. Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child. The word for child does not necessarily mean young, it can mean simply immature, and that is the leading thought here. And this IS probably a veiled reference back to the infantile revolutionary of vv. 5-7. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the judgment on a land of being ruled by children, whether actual children or emotional children. When you have an immature king, his courtiers, his princes, will also tend to be fools. Here they feast in the morning, which is not to say they don't feast at night, but simply to point out they are debauched and self-indulgent.

Charles XII became the king of Sweden in 1697 when he was only 17 years old. The wild behavior of the child king and his friends included riding horseback through his grandmother's apartment, knocking people to the ground in the city streets, and shooting out the windows of the royal palace. In response, the preachers of Stockholm all agreed to preach from this very text, Ecclesiastes 10:16, on the same Sunday, to pronounce woe on the land with a child for a king and princes who feasted in the morning.

The opposite of this woe is seen in v.17: Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobility. Nobility here means a freeman, one who could thus exercise a critical independence in judgment. So we can see the primary contrast is not one of age, but of wisdom. Josiah became king at a young age and was a good king. Under this type of ruler the princes feast at the proper time. They don't invert the social order. And they feast for strength, meaning bodily strength to govern well, not for drunkenness. Drunken kings pervert justice. Wise kings know how to feast with dignity and wisdom.

I take v.18 to be a continued commentary on the indolence of the immature ruler and princes of v.16, though it may be more general. Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. Without maintenance your personal house, or the "house" of the state, which I think is in view here, will fall into a state of disrepair. And in v.19 we get the words of the boy king and his princes at play: Bread is for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers

everything. It's a sort of primitive drinking song which they repeat while the feasting and watching the roof of the house sink in.

Under this type of leadership people will be very tempted to curse the king. So we get the warning of v.20: Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich. The rich here is just a parallel term for the indulgent king and his princes.

The situation here is one, as we've seen before, of an absolute monarchy, possibly during the Persian period. In that situation, the king had numerous spies and informants. They were known as the eyes and ears of the king. Surveillance and control always accompany the total State. We do it now with cameras and computers and the endless irritation of having to divulge personal information for virtually every transaction. Even the bedroom, it turns out, is not a place of sanctuary from the total state. For, the text says, the birds of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature will tell the matter. The reference, of course, is not to actual birds, but probably to spies or to the general idea that, in this sort of state, you should NEVER curse the king. In our day we would say something like "the walls have ears." Criticism is fine. Even caustic criticism in our setting is fine. But cursing and reviling a ruler is forbidden, even under great provocation. Do NOT curse the king.

Conclusion

If this is the nature of the world, our response is best summarized by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, where the themes of wisdom, caution, folly, drunkenness, and the nature of our time, are all taken up with apostolic authority. The whole passage is a sort of mirror image, and antidote to Ecclesiastes 10: Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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