

Ecclesiastes chapter 10 – The Anatomy of Folly

This is from a 1907 book of poetic stories:

*You know – at least you ought to know,
For I have often told you so-
That Children never are allowed
To leave their Nurses in a Crowd;
Now this was Jim's especial Foible,
He ran away when he was able,
And on this inauspicious day
He slipped his hand and ran away!*

*He hadn't gone a yard when – Bang!
With open jaws a Lion sprang,*

*And hungrily began to eat
The Boy: beginning at his feet.*

*Now just imagine how it feels
When first your toes and then your heels,
And then by gradual degrees,
Your shins and ankles, calves and knees,
Are slowly eaten, bit by bit.
No wonder Jim detested it!*

That comes from "Jim: Who ran away from his Nurse, and was eaten by a Lion."

Other stories from the same book include:

George: Who played with a Dangerous Toy, and suffered a Catastrophe of considerable Dimensions.

Matilda: Who told Lies, and was Burned to Death.

Rebecca: Who Slammed Doors For Fun And Perished Miserably.

And in a funny kind of way, they are wisdom literature!

I guess there are two fun ways to teach wisdom using stories, to tell you about wise people who did something right: or to tell you and describe fools, who ruin themselves and others by their foolishness, and let them be a lesson to you.

Chapter 10 (and we are also looking at the start of chapter 11) is more of this second type, a cautionary tale, as we think about not the wise today, but fools.

And our way through the chapter will be this, we'll consider the first 3 introductory verses, we'll quickly survey two points made in the middle section, and dwell mostly on the final verses of chapter 10, from v15, and also the start of chapter 11.

So, in his introduction, the teacher says this: **take note**, being wise or foolish, really matters!

^{v1} As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

Can you imagine it? In the perfume section, where those ladies are there spraying you, and trying to persuade you to buy things?



Or at the airport, where they make you what the long route all the way past the different stores, and is perfume everywhere?

“Lavender” “Rose petal” “dead fly” – no one would buy it. Dead flies are so small, but a little bit of foolishness does a huge amount of damage. He is saying, a tiny bit of foolishness, stinks!

^{v2} The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left.

He is not speaking about political leanings, he’s not telling you which way to vote!
He’s saying wisdom and folly are total opposites, they take you in totally opposite directions. They are worlds apart.

^{v3} Even as fools walk along the road, they lack sense
and show everyone how stupid they are.

People can see it! It’s not hidden, your foolishness shows.

Not necessarily because you stagger, not necessarily because your jeans clash with your top, but for whatever reason, the fool thinks that it’s all private, but it’s not – everyone can see how stupid you are.

In his introduction, he saying *this really matters*: You need to be wise! For your own sake pay attention.

The next section is hard to follow if you take it all in order, but there are two themes I want to draw out, and as I said I’ll try to be quite brief.

The first one is this: **Don’t speak, think and listen.**

And it is perhaps the most obvious characteristic of a fool: they won’t listen to advice, it seems like they don’t stop and think.

That’s right isn’t it? We can all think of people, who when they do something wrong, our first thought is “I tried to warn you, I was trying to tell you, but you just wouldn’t listen!”

And it’s so frustrating!

I know there are times people think that about *me*. I wouldn’t listen, I knew bet, I wouldn’t think – It’s probably my poor wife who feels that way the most!

I’m sure you’re the same, stop and think!

So the teacher says in

^{v4} If a ruler’s anger rises against you,

do not leave your post;

calmness can lay great offenses to rest.

And we are to imagine a lookout at his post, he’s upset his commanding officer, in a panic, he does a runner! And what does the commanding officer think, “he’s guilty”, he’s afraid, he’s running, he needs to be punished!

The fool who runs away in panic simply confirms the suspicions, and increases the punishment!

Calmness: can lay great offences to rest: He's saying... Stop and think!

v12 really starts to focus on words, and this: the fool will not be taught.

¹² Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious, [that means they help and protect others, they are a blessing]

but fools are consumed by their own lips.

¹³ At the beginning their words are folly;

at the end they are wicked madness—

¹⁴ and fools multiply words.

The NT letter of James says our tongue is like the rudder of a great ship, so small, yet steers the huge ship.

The tongue is only 0.6% of the body, it is so small, and yet can do that so much damage.

I can think of someone who came to a church I worked for, for help and advice. We listened carefully and give our advice, we offered support. But this person just wouldn't listen, all they wanted was to tell us their solution. Their way was the only way.

Although they apparently came for advice, really they just wanted us to listen, approve their plans, and weigh in with help.

It's so frustrating, especially when, their plans and ideas cause them a great deal of hurt and harm, and they end up disturbing and upsetting others to!

That's the first theme, don't speak(!) stop and think.

Do you do that? In the moment, do you pause?

And let's include things like text messages, facebook and email writing that idea of speaking. They didn't have those forms of communication then – but how easy it is to send that swift reply, before thinking!

We see this wisdom in the Lord Jesus, in the way that he so often answered questions with other questions.

Have you ever noticed that? It gives you time to think, it helps you to understand what somebody really means.

If somebody says: "Why did God allow that?"

Ask "What makes you ask, have you experienced some really hard things?"

Someone says "Why does God say 'no' to that?"

Ask "what would you expect him to say?"

That's the first theme: Don't speak, think and listen.

The second theme he brings out is: **Work in the right way.**

I think when I was younger, I used to think that if I worked hard, then I would be successful and achieve lots. *Hard work* was the answer, and I was willing to put it in.

As I grew up, I realised that that's not always the case – some people work hard and get nowhere – and others are lazy as ever, and hugely successful, it's not fair!

Money particularly, is not fair! If you have loads of money, it just multiplies and multiplies – you can invest in property, or shares – and in comes rent, the house prices increase, and yet those who have very little, and work really really hard, struggle.

The teacher sees this topsy-turvy reality:

He sees the wrong people in power

⁵There is an evil I have seen under the sun,
the sort of error that arises from a ruler:

⁶Fools are put in many high positions,
while the rich occupy the low ones.

The wrong person in power!

But he also sees a topsy-turvy reality, where you can work hard, but that leads you to trouble!

^{v8}Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. ⁹Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them;
whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

Do you see, it seem so unfair, half the team are sat around having a coffee break, they've gone for a cigarette, and you're working hard. You're the one who makes that breakthrough, you burst through the wall – and boom! You get bitten by a snake. It's not fair!

So, perhaps we should reject *hard work*! It doesn't always pay!

But he goes on... *Work smart, rather than hard*:

^{v10}If the ax is dull
and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed,
but skill will bring success.

¹¹If a snake bites before it is charmed,
the charmer receives no fee.

He's saying, use your skill! Work smart not hard.

It's the catchphrase of work consultants. Seen as the solution to overly busy timetables, and burnout from working too much.

You can have loads of strength, but working with a blunt axe, it's foolish, work smart. You can have loads of bravery with a poisonous snake, but it's not enough. Use your skill. Whatever your work is, stop and think, be wise: work in the right way.

But even then, he says v14:

"No one knows what is coming, who can tell someone else what will happen after them?"

Yes, hard work is good, but be careful!

Working smart is good, it won't necessarily bring the reward you want. God is in control not you, and you don't know what he will do? We simply cannot control the outcomes.

And that takes us to the last point, where I want us to spend most of our time.

You see we've heard his warning, don't rush in! Think, and listen before you speak.

We've heard his warning, hard work doesn't pay, work smart – that may not even get you where you want.

And the fool takes all that to heart – and says, well why should I bother.

The last point, Fools don't know how to get going: **Have a go**

This is where it's most like a cautionary tale...

We're introduced to the lazy fool in v15 "a fool's work wearies him, he does not know the way to town"

This fool is so weary, so tired from ""much work"", that he can't get anything done – except there is a sting in the tail.

He doesn't even know the way into town. It's so rare he goes into town for work he's forgotten the way. He doesn't know the way to the gym, to the post office, and certainly the way to work.

He knows where the TV remote is, he knows how to whinge and complain, but that's all he knows, complaint after complaint. Too busy to do anything useful!

^{v18} Through laziness, the rafters sag;
because of idle hands, the house leaks.

And of course that happens literally, if you don't get round to sorting out the house then it begins to fall down.

But it's a metaphor as well, the household suffers

If the provider of the house isn't actually bothering to earn a living, everybody is dragged down.

We need to get on and make the most of our lives, perhaps the lazy fool listens to the teacher and says:

“You can’t be too careful can you”? I need to be careful, I need to know my limits! I’m not going to put myself forward, like those foolish people who are not as good as they think they are, I’m not make that mistake, so I’m going to hold back; you need to be cautious! “Words can be very dangerous” he says “so it’s much better for me to draw back and be quiet” so he does, and doesn’t engage with anyone. He says, life is so uncertain isn’t it, much better for me not to take any risks...

But that’s what the teacher addresses in chapter 11: **inactivity is foolish too**. And here he is more positive:

11 Ship your grain across the sea;

after many days you may receive a return.

He is saying, make an investment, even if it’s far away to a place you can’t see, even if you may have to wait a long time to get your return, it will come in the end!

In other words: **Push the boat out!**

Don’t forever play safe, of course don’t be reckless, verse two is very clear about care:

^{v2} Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;

you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

He’s saying, share the risk, don’t be reckless – don’t put all your eggs in one basket, invest in lots of different places, because you don’t know what will happen.

But he is saying, push the boat out, but spread it out, be wise. Doing nothing, that’s folly!

Don’t use speculation about the possibilities of what *might* happen in life as an excuse

^{v4} Whoever watches the wind will not plant;

whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

And we will done it haven’t we, just looked up to see if it’s going to rain, rather than getting on and doing the garden before it does.

And some people are forever wondering what’s going to happen in the future, and because they’re speculating about it, then not actually getting on and doing what they need to do!

Taking on responsibility, applying for that new job, not starting that relationship, not pushing the door to Christian work, not inviting those neighbours round to dinner, not trying to initiate that conversation with a colleague about the Christian faith because they are forever trying to work out “is this the right time or not”, well there is a case for doing that, but don’t forever do it – we don’t know the future, get on with life, push the boat out.

^{v5} As you do not know the path of the wind,

or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb,

so you cannot understand the work of **God**,

the Maker of all things.

You'll never be able to work life out totally, you can't tie all the loose ends up.
God does.

You don't need to know what's coming, *you need to know him*. And if we know him, we will push the boat out.

He's the great creator who stands at the beginning of life, he's the mighty judge who stands at the ends of life, and in between, he is in control of everything!

Trust him, you can be sure he's there.

He can give you the confidence for you to launch out and take risks:

⁶Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.

I think he's saying: live life! Take risks, push the boat out.

There such a thing as a foolish risk, and the teacher saying, look don't do that – think about things!

But there's also, faithlessness – God is in control.

After all he's said, there's no meaning here and there.

He is saying: Live life! Go for it, have a go.

And it's possible for some of us, that some people are actually playing much too safe with life.

So here's the balance: "be cautious, yes" "be wise", but don't be *overcautious*. Push the boat out.

So, churches can be over safe:

"Are we sure that will work?" We say. "I can imagine it failing", "we've always done things this way!"

But there's a world to win, there are needy people all over the town of Stevenage – who don't have a saving faith.

And we run events, we try to reach out, but could we do more? Could more people get on board with supporting reloaded? Could we publicize events to our friends better? Could we invite people to come to church with us?

We try to do things and head outside the building, we have been delivering grapevines to people's doors. Could you help. We've run a big event at the St. Nicks park, we've invested money, should we have invested more money?

And what's true of churches is true individuals.

Could you be doing more with your time? With your gifts? With your life?

Think of the Lord Jesus, and the parable of the talents –the only individual there was actually told off is the one who buried the sum of money in the ground, and did nothing

with it. And Jesus has entrusted us with great things, and if we've put our trust in him, we've been forgiven, and now he wants us to be used.

And what a great example he is: Jesus did not play safe, he went back into Jerusalem, where he'd been persecuted, he went to the garden, he went to the last supper, he went to his trial!

Jesus gave his life, in the wholehearted sacrificial service of his father, and for you and me. And no doubt along the way, many people said "oh Jesus, don't go there" "Jesus don't do that!". He was never foolish, but he took faithful risks, trusting in his heavenly father.

And we are to do the same. I don't know what the risks are which you want to avoid. I don't know what God honouring risks you should be taking?

It might be uncomfortable, maybe they will laugh at you if you say that thing. Maybe they'll say "no" if you invite them, but do it anyway.

Maybe it's joining a home group so that you can be strengthened in your faith, and make closer friends here at church.

Maybe it's to start writing letters to struggling and suffering Christians around the world?

Maybe it's volunteering to help the church with something you've seen we struggle with, or even asking how you can be useful – come and talk to Dave or myself!

Whatever it is, we need to remember the sovereign God, the God who can be trusted, and the God who loved us enough that he sent his son to die for us – He is someone you can trust, under him we can step out into uncharted territories, and make the most of the life he's entrusted to you.