

Ecclesiastes 10 • There is No Guarantee

Introduction

As we go through this section of Scripture it may be appropriate to remind our self that the church today is mostly characterized as trying to employ the methods and processes of the world. This is seen in its adoption of various media outlets, the character of its music, the way church services mirror the production values of a television show, and many, many more. The rise of things such as the Church Growth Movement seem to offer a kind of “guarantee” that if you do things a certain way, the results you desire are assured. But is that biblical? It’s very interesting to note the contrasting results of the very same things in the hands of the biblically wise versus the sinfully foolish.

¹Dead flies make a perfumer’s oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor. ²A wise man’s heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man’s heart directs him toward the left. ³Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool. ⁴If the ruler’s temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses.

[Read v.1-4]

Q: Why is it significant that “perfumer’s oil” is specifically mentioned instead of just oil?

A: The more delicate the perfume, the more easily it is spoiled, unlike common oil which resists such injury. It’s a way of conveying that the higher a person’s religious character is, the greater the damage caused by even a small sinful folly within them. Throughout Scripture biblical prayer and offerings are described as a “smooth and pleasing aroma” before God.

Q: Why might it be appropriate to represent sinful folly as “flies”?

1. Satan himself is called in Scripture “*Beelzebub*”, which literally means “prince of flies”.
2. It represents the fact that “big” sin (e.g., murder) is obvious in its effects, but the “little” sins which might be viewed as merely “annoying” are, in reality, equally devastating in their effect. It’s an example of Paul’s teaching, “*A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough*”. (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9)
3. The verbs in this statement are singular but the noun is plural implying that it’s not the accumulation of all the flies together, but each one individually which corrupts the whole. It really just takes one.

Q: How does the illustration of the flies in the perfume in v.1 connect with the observation in v.2 that the heart of the wise leads differently than the heart of the foolish?

A: When it comes to sin, the wise man is generally much more on his guard than the foolish.

Q: How does v.3 continue this thought?

A: It’s a way of illustrating that rejection of God’s Word and ways and the pursuit of sin results in someone who even in their simplest of acts, and in the course of everyday events, is obviously headed in the wrong direction.

Point: *The ironic thing is that such people, deceived and pursuing their own path, think everybody they meet is a fool just like them.*

Q: How could this advice about dealing with an earthly ruler possibly relate to the previous discussion?

A: If this is the wise course of action in an earthly situation, it is even more appropriate in a spiritual context. It’s a way of stating that true wisdom is marked by faithfulness to God’s Word and ways and never straying from it, whereas the nominal believer (the fool) will acquiesce to the pressure.

Application: *Wisdom does not guarantee that sin will be abolished and no longer an issue. Sin is always a choice whether it involves “big” sin or the annoying “little” sins. The mark of true wisdom is spiritual faithfulness regardless.*

⁵There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler— ⁶folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. ⁷I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.

[Read v.5-7]

Q: Where does this evil operate and where does it originate?

A: “Under the sun”. It’s a literary way of describing how the world system has corrupted something contrary to its original intentions.

Q: What is the nature of this great evil?

A: There is no direct connection between being wise and righteous and being rich and powerful.

Point: *From God’s biblical point of view, regardless of how rich or powerful or exalted someone may be in the world, their allowance of sin to rule in their heart renders them a “fool” from God’s perspective. We are not just responsible to faithfully follow God when we are poor and humble, but when we are rich and powerful as well.*

Q: Why is this section qualified as being “like an error which goes forth from the ruler”?

A: When a powerful ruler makes a grievous mistake or inflicts a terrible judgment, its effects are felt and multiplied upon everyone within the kingdom. The same occurs when, in the course of how the world operates, the rich and powerful lack the wisdom of spiritual faithfulness. This is why this particular brand of “folly” is first qualified as “evil” because in this case the fool isn’t just hurting himself, but inflicting multiplied harm on all those around him.

Application: *Have you ever said, “If I were in charge things would be different”? From God’s point of view power and wealth are no guarantee anyone possesses what is necessary to be a biblically effective leader – the wisdom to put God’s Word and ways into practice. If we’re not faithful as a servant and common citizen, we will only multiply that unfaithfulness if placed in a greater position of power and authority.*

⁸He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. ⁹He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. ¹⁰If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. ¹¹If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.

[Read v.8-11]

Observation: *Solomon sequesters into some proverbial expressions to illustrate the truths he has been teaching.*

Q: Is v.8 talking about a literal pit?

A: When we examine the whole of Scripture we find that this expression is most often used to illustrate someone setting a trap for another. But in the foolish sinner’s case, it is often used against him. Case in point: Haman prepared a gallows for Mordecai but it was Haman himself who was hung on it.

Q: Is v.8 talking about a literal wall?

A: It’s the teaching that those who seek to break through the Law and doctrines of God and, in the end, suffer for it.

Q: How is v.9 and extension of the teaching in v.8?

A: It’s the contrast of someone first destroying the boundaries of God’s Law and doctrines and then attempting to replace and build something else in their place.

Q: And how might this be continued in v.10?

A: It's an illustration of someone undertaking things by their own strength and wisdom as opposed to God's.

Q: Why is it appropriate that this section concludes with the illustration of the snake and snake charmer?

A: In general it speaks of someone whose work in many ways imitates God's ways but is ultimately unsuccessful because it is undertaken apart from Him. Specifically it is particularly appropriate when one considers that the serpent is the repeated symbol of Satan throughout Scripture and how dangerous it is for those who take him on according to their own strength and ways.

Application: *Methods and processes are no guarantee of spiritual success; anything undertaken that is not in full submission to God's Word and ways is in danger of coming back to inflict the worst results on the very person employing those methods or processes in their own strength.*

[Read v.12-15]

Q: How would you summarize the characteristics of the fool provided here?

1. The fool is consumed by his own words rather the Word of God. (v.12)
2. In the beginning the fool is merely beginning to stray off course ("his talking is folly") but clinging to that behavior ultimately leads to complete deception and destruction ("wicked madness"). (v.13)
3. Instead of acknowledging he doesn't really know the outcome of this life, he disguises it by pursuing his own words and ways in ever-greater frequency. (v.14)
4. Ultimately the fool doesn't see the point of pursuing anything in this life because he can't see anything leading anywhere. (v.15)

Application: *One of the benefits of the wisdom of adhering to God's Word and ways is that, in the context of this present life, it provides the Believer with a purpose for the things of this life, whereas the sinner is self-deceived into viewing anything leading to God as worthless.*

[Read v.16-20]

Q: What is the basic teaching of this dual "blessing" and "curse"?

A: It is speaking to the contrast of those who use the things of this world appropriately as opposed to those who use them just to please their self. Especially in the context of kings and rulers, the teaching is that both behaviors – good or bad – are not just limited in their impact to those who engage in them, but have a multiplied effect on others around them.

Point: *To fulfill the Law to "Love your neighbor as yourself" would mean that one would not engage in these behaviors.*

Q: What is the point of the concluding illustration of "a little bird told me"?

A: If our rulers are corrupt and childlike, only pleasing themselves, it's especially unwise to criticize them from a worldly point of view because worldly repercussions are inevitable.

Application: *There is no guarantee that our earthly leaders or government will be Christ-centered, which is why Scripture commands that our first and foremost action is to hold them up in prayer that spiritual change would come and ultimately result in worldly change.*

¹²Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; ¹³the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. ¹⁴Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? ¹⁵The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city.

¹⁶Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. ¹⁷Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness. ¹⁸Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. ¹⁹Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. ²⁰Furthermore, 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.

Overall Application

*Perhaps the greatest lesson we can derive from this chapter is that we will never be permanently successful pursuing things according to the world's ways at the expense of God's Word and ways. This particularly hits home when you consider all the worldly strategies at work in the world today (e.g., Purpose Driven, Emergent Church, etc.) and attempts to co-opt the world's approaches to media and music. The repeated biblical call is to **personal** faithfulness to His Word and ways alone, forsaking all others – that's the only guaranteed way of attaining biblical success.*