LESSON 11

FOOLS RUSH IN

Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

In this lesson we learn how wisdom can prevent the effects of foolish mistakes and choices.

OUTLINE

If we do something really destructive, it's usually because we've tolerated smaller instances of foolish behavior. Asking God for wisdom daily can keep little "foolishnesses" from becoming big ones—whether in personal behavior, leadership, the work setting, or our words.

I. Foolishness in Little Things

II. Foolishness in Leadership
- A. The Ego-Driven Leader
- B. The Easy-Going Leader
- C. The Engineered Leader
- D. The Evil Leader

III. Foolishness in the Labor Pool

IV. Foolishness in Language
- A. An Untamed Tongue
- B. An Unkind Tongue
- C. An Unwise Tongue
- D. An Undisciplined Tongue
- E. An Unreasonable Tongue
- F. An Unfaithful Tongue

OVERVIEW

Solomon is the author of a large part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. And in this section of Ecclesiastes, he returns to the theme of wisdom versus foolishness. Ecclesiastes 10 is like a cross-section of the book of Proverbs. The teacher-king dispenses one wise saying, proverb-like, after another.

He is going to warn us about foolishness in four different areas of life: little things, leadership, the labor pool, and language.

Foolishness in Little Things

Solomon begins with a rather distasteful picture: A fly falls into a bottle of perfume, dies, and spoils the whole thing. A delightful aroma turns into a foul odor. In the same way, a little bit of foolishness can destroy the image of one respected for wisdom and honor. The use of a tiny fly as the image has a reason. We can be ruined by something just as relatively small. We don't have to make a huge mistake to be brought down; it can be something small, but senseless and foolish.

The Bible is filled with suggestions that little things can ruin big things. A little leaven can leaven a whole lump of dough (1 Corinthians 5:6); a little fox can spoil a whole vineyard (Song of Solomon 2:15); and the small tongue can change the direction of large things (James 3:5). In Southern California we know all too well that a tiny spark can cause a mammoth wildfire with huge damage to property and life.

Often we'll hear someone complain about being in trouble for something they did: "It wasn't any big deal . . . ." All it takes is a "little deal" to ruin an otherwise good life.

We've already seen Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 9:18: "But one sinner destroys much good." One person in a large group can cause huge amounts of trouble. Whether it's one word, one act, one person, one careless moment. It's the little things that can be the most destructive. We ought to pray daily for God to protect us from becoming the "fly" in the ointment of our life or somebody else's.

Verse 2 is not a statement against left-handed people. It's a cultural reference to Solomon's day. The right hand was thought to be the place of power and the left hand a place of weakness. It's another way for Solomon to say that a moment of weakness, or foolishness, characterizes a fool. A good example is the children's fable called "The Emperor's New Clothes." Remember what happened?

The emperor walked around naked because he believed the lies of two men who came to town telling him they would dress him in the world's finest robes. His vanity overruled his sensibility and he made a fool of himself. Foolishness in little things can ruin even an emperor's life.

Foolishness in Leadership

All who are in leadership positions (and everybody leads someone) should take these next verses to heart about foolishness in leadership. There are four kinds of leaders who make foolish mistakes.

The Ego-Driven Leader

This leader abuses those under him because his ego is the most important thing in his life. Woodrow Wilson once wrote that every man who takes office in Washington either grows or swells. He said, "When I give a man an office, I watch him carefully to see whether or not he is swelling or growing." Solomon wrote in Proverbs of the danger of a ruler who lacks self-control (16:32; 25:28).

What should you do if you are under a leader who swells instead of grows, whose ego is more important than those he leads? Solomon says, "Do not leave your post; for conciliation pacifies great offenses" (verse 4). Don't panic, don't quit your job, don't leave your post. Be biblical in your responses (Proverbs 15:1; 16:14; 25:15).

The Easy-Going Leader

The opposite to the ego-driven leader is the easy-going leader who, often out of insecurity, fails to lead with appropriate strength. Desiring not to offend, he puts people in leadership who shouldn't be there. So the wrong people are leading and the right people are not (verse 7).

The Engineered Leader

Sometimes people are put into leadership positions not because they're good leaders but for political reasons. Their appointments are arranged, not earned. They end up partying instead of leading. Solomon says beware of such childish, foolish leaders as these. They will enrich themselves at the expense of those they are supposed to lead.

The Evil Leader

The evil leader is lazy—no questions asked. The organization is falling down around him because he is too lazy to lead. Because of his laziness, the kingdom he is leading is destroyed. Solomon

addresses laziness thoroughly in Proverbs, and the evil leader is an example of laziness in leadership.

Foolishness in the Labor Pool

In this section, Solomon points out things that can happen when foolishness reigns in the workplace. He gives us five examples:

1. A man digging a pit can fall into it and get hurt. A mortician friend of mine said something like this happened at a funeral. As the pallbearers approached the grave, carrying the casket, one of them tripped and fell into the grave.
2. A man tearing down a wall reaches his hand through and is bitten by a snake. Snakes love to hide in the cool, dark recesses of stone walls. It's not smart to reach before looking.
3. A man in a stone quarry gets hurt by a large stone. That could hurt big time depending on the size of the stone. (There were no hard hats in Solomon's day.)
4. A man chopping wood is injured by a flying piece of wood. Or maybe the ax bounces off the log and cuts his leg. Who knows? Either way, the man is injured.
5. A man cuts wood with a dull ax and has to work twice as hard. If he would just invest time in sharpening the ax, he could save lots of time in the long run. He should work smarter instead of harder.

We probably have tools of our trade that need sharpening. We could work smarter instead of harder. And all of us could exercise more wisdom in the workplace.

Foolishness in Language

Nowhere is the evidence of foolishness more apparent than in human speech. All of us have said things devoid of wisdom, things we wish we could reach out and grab and take back immediately after we uttered them. So Solomon next addresses foolishness in language. There are six ways our tongue can reveal our foolishness.

An Untamed Tongue

In the days when snake charmers were common, Solomon uses a reference that is a little unfamiliar to us today. Snake charmers would use the swaying motion of a flute to "charm" and seemingly immobilize a snake. But Solomon warns that the snake can strike before the charmer even begins his work.

The tongue is no different. It can strike while you're getting ready to keep it under control. Just when you think you're the master of your tongue, it can make you look foolish. There is a time to speak and a time to remain silent, Solomon said in chapter 3; but the tongue seems to have its own mind at times. And the more we babble, the more chance we have of looking foolish.

An Unkind Tongue

A wise man's words will be gracious, but a foolish man's words will destroy others and eventually destroy him as well (Proverbs 10:32; 13:3; 21:23). Is there anything more destructive than the tongue? In his letter to the church, the apostle James says we can bridle a horse and steer a ship; but no one can control the tongue. You and I have both walked away from situations wondering how we could have said what we said. We would do anything to take it back, but we can't.

An Unwise Tongue

This is the person who talks just for the sake of talking. Either they love to hear themselves talk, or they are insecure with silence. Their words are a stream-of-consciousness tape that plays non-stop as long as they're awake. This person sees no difference between words—they're all the same: important! The trouble is, no one that he's around thinks so. He is foolish because of not knowing how to speak only when there is something meaningful to say.

An Undisciplined Tongue

A fool is full of words but does not realize he is saying nothing. Solomon warned against the undisciplined tongue in Proverbs: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (10:19). Roxanne Lulofs labels an undisciplined talker HARM—"Hit and Run Mouth." They will talk to anyone about anything, listening to no one. Dominance is the game, and attention is the goal.

Here's the epitaph of a former HARM:

"Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
Lies Arrabella Young,
Who on the 24th of May
Began to hold her tongue."

It takes death to quiet the tongues of some.

An Unreasonable Tongue

The message of verses 14b-15 is summarized by Proverbs 27:1. "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."

Solomon is talking about someone who is always boasting about the future. Our inability to know the future is a theme Solomon has touched on several times in Ecclesiastes: "For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?" (3:22); "Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?" (6:12); "For he does not know what will happen; so who can tell him when it will occur?" (8:7)

Solomon pokes a bit of fun at the person with the unreasonable tongue: The person is always boasting about the future, but does not even know how to get back to the city (verse 15b)! This is an Old Testament kind of understated humor. Picture a person babbling on about his great plans for the future, all the while totally lost. How could he ever find the future if he can't find his way back home?

An Unfaithful Tongue

The message here? Never say anything—anything!—in private that you wouldn't say in public. Chances are good that what you say will make its way to the ears of those about whom you were speaking. You've heard the expression, "A little bird told me." Solomon says that's how things you say can go from being private to public—a little bird. Obviously, birds don't talk. How things we intended to be private become public is just as mystifying as the idea of a bird talking. Solomon gives fair warning: It will happen, so don't consider being unfaithful with your tongue.

This potpourri of wisdom from Solomon has great practical value if we will but take it to heart. We have to be careful in life about the little things. Little compromises can have devastating results. We have to be careful about leadership—becoming or appointing or working under leaders who are foolish for one reason or another. We have to be careful in our day-to-day work. There are so many small mistakes and foolish choices we can make which can cause great injury and harm to ourselves or others. Finally, we have to be careful about our speech. This warning is the most important of all because the tongue is so explosive. Of course, it is not the tongue that is explosive, it is the human heart to which it is connected that is so dangerously volatile. Thus Solomon's exhortation in Proverbs to "keep your heart with all diligence" (4:23).

How do we assimilate such a wealth of practical advice? The best way I know is to turn to James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." There's your answer. Get up every day and ask God for wisdom; ask Him for skill to navigate the shallows and shoals of life so you don't do or say something foolish and hurt yourself or another person.

James 1:5 is not just a Bible verse! It is a lifeline from God to you. It is God's daily message to you. It is not just for those times when you face a major crisis in life. It can be, and should be, your daily prayer to God: "Lord, give me wisdom today. Give me skill to walk my path today. Help me not to do or say anything foolish. I am naturally foolish in my heart, Lord. I can't be wise without You! Thank You for promising to hear and answer this prayer."

If you want to live a life of wisdom . . . want to avoid foolish mistakes and choices . . . make James 1:5 your prayer on a daily basis.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. What is the danger in tolerating many small, but foolish, behaviors in our life?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 10:1-20.

   a. Out of the four areas of life that Solomon talked about, in which do you allow foolishness to exist the most?

   b. How can minor foolish things grow until they aren't minor anymore? What would happen then?

   c. Why should everyone take to heart Solomon's words on foolishness in leadership—even if they do not consider themselves a leader?

   d. Do you relate to any of the different types of leaders Solomon mentions in verses 4-7, and 16-19?

   e. What should you do if you are under one of these types of leaders?

   f. Are you guilty of being foolish with your language? If so, which of Solomon's six points (verses 11-14) do you struggle with the most?

   g. List practical exercises you can practice to avoid having a foolish tongue.

   h. *Little compromises can have devastating results.* Explain the truth in this. How can you take this to heart?

   i. What advice does James 1:5 give to those who seek to live in wisdom?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 10:1-20 and discuss the following questions:

   a. List the four different areas of life that Solomon warns us not to allow foolishness to grow.

   -
   -
   -
   -

   b. *A moment of weakness, or foolishness, characterizes a fool.* Explain how this quote describes what could happen in our lives, should we choose to be unwise.

2. Reread Ecclesiastes 10:4-7, 16-19.

   a. What are the four kinds of leaders who make foolish mistakes?

   -
   -
   -
   -

   b. What does Solomon suggest we do if we are under one of these types of leaders? (verse 4)

3. In Ecclesiastes 10:8-10, what five examples does Solomon give that could happen if foolishness reigns in the workplace? Explain what each of these mean:

   -
   -
   -

-

a. What would these examples look like in your workplace?

4. In Ecclesiastes 10:11-20, what are six ways our tongue can reveal our foolishness?

-
-
-
-
-
-

a. Discuss how we can avoid doing these things and not give into foolishness.

b. Little compromises can have devastating results. Discuss the truth in this. How can we take this to heart?

5. Discuss what advice James 1:5 gives to those who seek to live in wisdom.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are many instances in Scripture of the prominence of the right hand over the left as the hand of blessing, power, or authority. In Genesis 48:12-20, Jacob purposely crossed his hands in order to use his right hand to bless one of Joseph's sons over the other. God's right hand is described as the hand of power that defeated the Egyptians at the Exodus (Exodus 15:6, 12). Jacob's son Benjamin (*binyamin*, son of my right hand) was the object of special affection from his father. The Law came from God's right hand (Deuteronomy 33:2). And, of course, Christ is currently at the right hand of God in heaven (Acts 7:55).