

Observations about wisdom and folly

Intro: The wise and the foolish under the sun. As Solomon observed life, he could see two kinds of people, the wise and the foolish; and he could see that certain characteristics attach themselves to each. He could see that wisdom and folly have far reaching consequences for both the individual and society. So in this section Solomon addresses some of the characteristics and consequences of both wisdom and folly.

Wisdom is a powerful force but it is not always respected as it should be!

This wisdom I have also seen under the sun, and it seemed great to me: There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it, besieged it, and built great snares around it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered (or might have delivered) the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man. (Ecclesiastes 9:13-15)

How characteristic this is of people in general. Sometime because a person does not have the social characteristics of “success”, he does not receive the respect that he might otherwise deserve because of his devotion to God. In this case, a wise man might have delivered the city had people been able to overlook his poverty and listen; but because he was poor they relied upon their own strength and apparently lost the battle.

This episode suggested a number of lessons.

So often we rely upon human power rather divine guidance. It was costly for a city in this case.

Then I said: “Wisdom is better than strength. (Ecclesiastes 9:16a) Nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard (Eccl. 9:16b).

As we observed before, when a person is poor, there is often an unstated assumption that he is also not very wise. Yet, often a person may be the victim of circumstances and be yet also be quite wise.

Words of the wise, spoken quietly, should be heard rather than the shout of a ruler of fools. (Ecclesiastes 9:17)

Sometimes the person who makes the most noise is heard and the person with something worthwhile to say is overlooked because he is not aggressive. The quiet words of the wise are far better than the noisy rantings of fools.

Wisdom can be corrupted by a small amount of folly; however wisdom is superior.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good.” (Ecclesiastes 9:18)

And even wise men can have their wisdom tainted by a moment’s folly!

Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor. (Ecclesiastes 10:1)

*A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left.
(Ecclesiastes 10:2)*

These go indifferent directions. The right hand is the symbol of strength and righteousness in Hebrew thought.

The right hand is traditionally viewed as more dexterous, the left more awkward. A wise man knows the right way to do a thing; a fool is an awkward bungler. (Believer's commentary)

Folly is pervasive in its effects upon one's life.

Even when a fool walks along the way, he lacks wisdom, and he shows everyone that he is a fool. (Ecclesiastes 10:3)

A person whose heart is rebellious against God does not even in something as common as walking manifest the dignity and respect of the wise.

Folly can affect our relationship with a superior.

Perhaps one feature of the foolish that is often overlooked is the tendency to conform and surrender principle easily. Such might be manifest in conflict by panicking in fear or deserting in bitterness (Eaton). Perhaps it prompted the following proverb:

If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post; for conciliation pacifies great offenses. (Ecclesiastes 10:4)

Folly can reverse the proper order of society by its indiscretions.

There is an evil I have seen under the sun, as an error proceeding from the ruler: Folly is set in great dignity, while the rich sit in a lowly place. I have seen servants on horses, while princes walk on the ground like servants. (Ecclesiastes 10:5-7)

Solomon seems to explore what can happen when folly is set in high places. Instead of the benefits of a wise ruler, there are instead the reversals and improprieties of bad choices.

The foolish suffer the consequences of angry vindictiveness.

A fool is noted for his lack of self-control and angry vindictiveness. Such often punishes those who practice it. The snares they lay for others, they fall into themselves.

He who digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent. He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits wood may be endangered by it. (Ecclesiastes 10:8-9)

The foolish suffer the consequences of impatience in not taking the time to do what is wise and of laziness and procrastination in not using one's skills.

If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success. (Ecclesiastes 10:10)

"If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer" (Ecclesiastes 10:11).

The foolish suffer the consequences of impromptness as well. If on the one hand the foolish suffer from haste and impatience, they may also suffer from not using the skills they have by laziness and procrastination.

The foolish suffer the consequences of ill-spoken words while the wise generate favor from others.

The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up; the words of his mouth begin with foolishness, and the end of his talk is raving madness. (Ecclesiastes 10:12-13)

A fool also multiplies words. No man knows what is to be; who can tell him what will be after him? (Ecclesiastes 10:14)

Fools spout off all kinds of things not realizing how little they know.

Their folly is no more evident than when they confidently act as if they know the future!

Just as the wise uses his time and skills properly, the fool exhausts himself in unproductive labor.

The labor of fools wearies them, for they do not even know how to go to the city! (Ecclesiastes 10:15)

We have an expression that someone doesn't have enough sense to get out of the rain. Maybe this is the Hebrew equivalent. He couldn't find his way to town! How is folly demonstrated? By laziness and

Wise and foolish rulers have very different effects on the lands they rule.

Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!

A lad is typically without the wisdom of age and princes who are "ready to party" will bring hardship on the lands they rule.

Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time—For strength and not for drunkenness! (Ecclesiastes 10:16-17)

Note the blessing of wise rulers who rule unselfishly and responsibly.

Fools neglect even their own property.

The one place where it would appear all people would want to exert effort for their own benefit, the fool also neglects.

Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks. (Ecclesiastes 10:18)

The deterioration of one's home is just a metaphor for the whole life of the foolish person who is lazy and unproductive.

The fool often has a very narrow perspective on what is important in life.

A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers everything. (Ecclesiastes 10:19)

It does not appear that Solomon is commending here a purely carnal approach to life; but instead is showing how folly expresses itself in one's attitude toward life. The fool often considers food, drink, and money to

be the only things worth striving for and thus, fails to add the important virtues connected with a spiritual approach to life.

The foolish do not consider the consequences of their speech.

Solomon thus urges wisdom in guarding our words, even when we think they might not even be heard by others!

Do not curse the king, even in your thought; do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the air may carry your voice, and a bird in flight may tell the matter. (Ecclesiastes 10:20)

I suppose this is where we got the expression, “a little bird told me”. Can we talk about others even in secret and it not find expression in our behavior toward them. Even what we say in private may condition our attitude towards others so that they know how we feel about them.

Conclusion: We should remember that in Hebrew thought, wisdom is not just advanced intellect; it is understanding that comes through the fear of God. Folly in turn is the opposite. Through this series of observations Solomon has shown us that there is a marked difference between living a life of folly and living a life of wisdom. It is our choice; but Solomon would have us find the wisdom that comes through “fearing God and keeping His commandments”.