



The Idiot's Guide to Wisdom

SERIES: *Searching for Satisfaction in an Unsatisfying World*

What do the following statements have in common?

"Every dog has its day."

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

"Life is short; eat dessert first."

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

"Quitters never win; winners never quit."

Each one of those familiar statements is a modern day proverb. A proverb is a short, pithy, memorable saying which is designed to teach something useful about life. Somehow proverbs stick in our mind, probably because they employ concrete images that we're familiar with. Proverbs are especially helpful in teaching the young. I can't remember a whole lot of the content of the lectures I received as a child from my parents, but I can remember several of the proverbs.

This morning as we continue our study of the book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher turns to the proverb to teach us some important things about life. His subject is simply put, wisdom and foolishness. He wants us to know the difference; he wants us to see the difference.

This is critical to understanding the overall message of this book. Remember this fellow is on a journey. He's observing life under the sun. He builds an observation tower at ground level to see what life is all about. One of the things he's learned is that we can't figure out what life is all about on our own. Life is perplexing and full of enigmas. Right when you think you have the puzzle all put together you realize you're missing some pieces. God may have a plan, but forget about trying to figure out how this or that fits into it.

Last week we saw several of the hard facts of life that we all have to live with. Life is mysterious. Life is unfair. Life is short. Life is unpredictable. And life is unrewarding. In light of these hard facts, we might have a tendency to just give up; to kind of sit back and let life happen to us, or maybe even to despair that we can eek out of life any kind of meaning. But the Teacher wants us to know that we can live well in light of the hard facts of life. He's already told us to trust God, to enjoy what he gives you, and to work hard while you can.

This week we add one more thing to the list: pursue wisdom. Don't be a fool. Even though there are times wisdom is unrewarded in this cruel world we live in, it's still worth the effort. As a matter of fact, wisdom is the one skill we cannot afford to neglect. In chapter ten he employs the proverb to teach us to value wisdom over foolishness. He starts by making a general statement about wisdom and foolishness and then he applies this to several different areas of life.

I. Foolishness sticks out like a sore thumb.

The first thing he wants us to know is that foolishness sticks out like a sore thumb. Look at vv. 1-3.

"Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor. A

wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left. Even when the fool walks along the road his sense is lacking, and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool."

Here is an image that will stick in your head - dead flies rotting in a bottle of perfume! It used to smell good, but now it stinks. Or how about a gourmet meal brought to your table. A feast fit for a king, until you discover a couple of gnats in the mashed potatoes. His point is it just takes a little folly to ruin an entire life of wisdom and honor. You may have a beautiful white shirt, but spill a drop of catsup on it and it's ruined. His point is, don't even tinker with it.

To nail home his point he says it's NOT hard to see the difference between a wise person and a fool. The wise man's heart leads him to the right, while the fool's heart leads him to the left. This is not a pitch for the Republican party. In those days, the right hand represented strength and goodness, while the left side represented weakness and ineptitude. He's simply saying you can know a wise person by the direction of his life, and you can know a fool the same way. He can't even walk down the road without tripping. As we live and walk through life we broadcast what we are by our actions. Foolishness will stick out like a sore thumb.

But what does that look like in some of the everyday situations we find ourselves in. The Teacher goes on and applies this to several areas.

II. "Keep your head!" 10:4-7

First, he applies this to situations we get into with those in authority over us. Look at vv. 4-7.

"If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses. There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler - folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land."

He describes a couple of situations that might take place in relation to a ruler or a person in authority over you. In v. 3 he describes a situation where the ruler's temper rises against you. He doesn't say why he's mad. It could be you messed up; it could be he messed up and needed someone to blame. All of us know what it's like to be in that position, but how do you deal with that? It could be with a boss, or a parent, or coach, or a member of the city council.

The second situation may be even more frustrating. He describes a situation he calls an "evil." This time the ruler is not angry, he's just stupid. He's stupid because he appoints incompetent people to exalted positions. Riding a horse was something only dignitaries did. Here is a situation where slaves

are riding horseback, while princes, who should be riding horseback, are hoofing it. We might think that's a good thing, but the princes are the ones who are trained and educated for high office. It's not a good thing when the ill-prepared or undeserving are given those positions for the wrong reasons.

Maybe you've been in a situation where you or perhaps someone close to you was passed up for an award or a promotion that they really deserved. But because of favoritism or what we sometimes call "politics" someone else got the recognition. How do you deal with that?

Whichever situation you find yourself in, his advise is clear. He says, "do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses." The NIV says, "do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest." The idea is, don't quit in a huff; don't blow your top and do something you will later regret. Be calm. Be patient. Keep your head. It's not that it's always wrong to defend yourself in those situations, but be careful how you do it. The book of Proverbs puts it this way, **"Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone"** (Prov. 25:15). You see, operating calmly will actually have a bigger impact than making all kinds of noise.

This is a huge issue today. We've raised a generation of people who don't trust authority, and sometimes for good reason. Somewhere around fifty percent of the young adults in their twenties were raised in families where at least one of the parents bailed out. They were also raised in a time when Presidents said, "I didn't do it," but we all knew they did do it. I wouldn't trust authority either! But somewhere along the line, we all have to learn to live with authority figures who are flawed. If you can't respect the person, you can respect the position. The wise person will keep his head, even when things aren't fair.

III. "Work smarter, not harder!" 10:8-11

The next area he applies wisdom to is in the whole area of work. Look at vv. 8-11.

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

It's clear that the Teacher wants us to know that when you work bad things can happen. Murphy's Law is true - if something can go wrong it most likely will go wrong. Few of us have dug a pit lately, but if you do dig one you have to be careful you don't fall into it yourself. If you're remodeling and have to knock down an old wall, be careful - snakes love to hide in crevices and corners. If you're cutting stones, be careful they don't cut you. If you're splitting logs, watch out a piece of wood doesn't fly up and hit you in the head. Don't try to chop down a tree with a baseball bat. Sharpen your axe! And if you have the skill to

charm a snake, use it before, not after, he strikes. It's no use locking the barn door after the cow has gotten out.

Now what's the point of all this? Buy workman's compensation? That's a good idea, but I don't think so. He's talking about being smart in your work. "Work smarter, not harder." The wise will plan ahead and be prepared for the worst. I wonder why we wouldn't do that. Are we in a hurry? Do we think, "Well, it could never happen to me. I've been doing this for too long."

Sometimes the bad things that happen can be avoided. I'm not a very careful person when it comes to manual labor, and at times I've paid for it. I've learned that when you are out mowing your lawn, you want to be careful of the blades. I was stupid enough to reach down while the mower was still going and it chopped off the top of my middle finger. People ask me if I've ever broken a bone. I tell them no but I sliced one in half once. When I tell them what happened, they always say, "Why did you do that?" It's a good question. The answer: I just wasn't thinking.

The principle is found at the end of v. 10, **"Wisdom has the advantage of giving success."** Do you want to be successful? Be careful. Plan ahead. Don't take anything for granted. Work smarter, not harder.

IV. "Watch your words!" 10:12-15

For most of us, the dangers that we face in the work we do are more relational than physical. The next area he turns to has to do with wise and foolish words.

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

He says three things here about foolish words. First, foolish words are destructive. "...the lips of a fool consume him." In this case they're self-destructive. We live in a society where talk is cheap. We're bombarded with words, through literature, the media and the internet. The more there is of anything the less valuable it is. But in Hebrew culture words were considered powerful. God created the world through his spoken word. When the Son of God came, he was called "the Word made flesh." In the Bible, words are compared to weapons of war, a consuming fire, and a poisonous beast. Foolish words do a lot of damage. Most of all they damage the one who speaks. They can damage a reputation. They can ruin a career. They spoil a friendship.

Foolish words also tend to go from bad to worse. He starts with folly and he ends with madness. Unfortunately, it's a long trip in-between, because the fool multiplies his words. When in doubt, talk! He never stops talking and eventually his foot is stuck between his teeth. Someone said, "It is much better to keep silent and let everybody think you are a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!"

The last thing he says about foolish words is that they're proud. He says in v. 14, **"no man knows what will happen,"** but the fool keeps talking as if he does. He's talking about the pride we exhibit when we boast about our future plans. In the NT James talks about this. He says,

"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not

even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil" (Jms. 5:13-16).

When we talk as if we know what will happen, we talk like a fool.

The reality is, as he says in v. 15, that fool doesn't even know his way to the city. This is sarcasm. This is like saying, "He talks like he knows his way around the universe, but in fact he would get lost on an escalator." His own words have so wearied him that he doesn't even know how to get home.

So what do we do? Up in v. 12 he says, **"the words from the mouth of the wise man are gracious."** This can mean either that his words dispense grace or incur grace. It very well may mean both. Those who dispense grace with their words will receive grace from those around them. Gracious words are words that build someone up, like a sincere compliment. Gracious words are sensitive. When someone is hurting, you speak softly. You don't plow through their feelings with a John Deere tractor. Gracious words are tactful. They're spoken in the right way at the right time.

Perhaps you've heard about the husband whose wife left for a trip overseas. That same day their poodle died. When she called home that night and asked how everything was, he blurted, "The dog died." She was shocked and upset that he was so tactless and blunt. He asked, "What should I have said?" She answered, "You should have broken the news gently, in stages. When I called you from New York, you could have said the dog is on the roof. The next day when I called from London, you could have said he fell off the roof. The next day as I called from Paris, you could have said he was at the vets. Finally, from Rome, you could have told me he died." The husband paused and thought about it. Then his wife asked, "By the way, how's mother?" He said, "She's on the roof!"

I know, that's bad. But graceless, tactless words have consumed many a marriage. Watch your words. Be gracious in your speech.

V. "As the leader goes, so goes the people!" 10:16-20

The fourth area he covers has to do with leadership, particularly in the realm of politics. Look at vv. 16-20.

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

He starts by lamenting the country who has a young and immature king. His immaturity is seen and manifested in the laziness of his princes. They feast in the morning. As a result, the rafters sag and the house leaks. There is work to be done but they're too busy partying to do anything about it. Verse 19 describes the philosophy of these kinds of leaders. There should be quotation marks around these words. They act like all there is

to living is food and wine and money. Instead of serving the people, they use their power and wealth to their own advantage.

Verse 20 says to be careful what you say about such leaders, even in the privacy of your own bedroom. This may be the first recorded instance of the bugging of a home by the government! You've heard the phrase, "If walls could speak," or "A little bird told me." These probably originated with verse 20. Sooner or later, your criticism will be made known and you may end up in very deep water. Even in our own country where we're afforded freedom of speech this is wise counsel.

On the other hand, wise leaders bless the land. The king described here is born to rule and has been trained for his task since his youth. His close associates have the self-control and discipline that gives their lives strength.

The lesson here is about leadership. As the leaders go, so goes the people. Stuart Briscoe tells the story of a pastor who was officiating at the funeral of a war veteran. The dead man's military friends wished to take part in the service at the funeral home, so they asked the pastor to lead them down to the casket, stand with them for a solemn moment of remembrance, and then lead them out through the side door. He proceeded to do just that, but unfortunately the effect was lost when he chose the wrong door for the exit. He opened the door and they all marched with military precision into a broom closet, in full view of all the mourners, and they had to beat a hasty retreat in total confusion.

If we're going to lead, we need to make sure we know where we're going. People will follow us even into a broom closet! Don't ever underestimate the influence of a leader. Who do you lead? If you are a parent, you lead your kids. If you own a business, you lead your employees. If you coach a team, you lead your players. More important than WHO we lead, is the question of HOW we lead. Are we disciplined in our leadership? Do we model the things we're trying to get others to do? Are we conscientious, or have we become sloppy?

Recently I overslept for an important meeting that I lead each week at 6:00 AM. I was roused out of bed by a phone call from one of the guys who was waiting for me. I felt terrible. On the way, I thought of how I would explain this to the guys. It seemed to me the best excuse to give them was that my alarm clock malfunctioned. But then I realized that would be a lie. The fact is I had totally forgot about the meeting! I hadn't even set my alarm clock! As a leader, I was faced with a choice. Do I tell them the truth and risk losing their respect, or do I lie and try to keep it? After all, it wouldn't hurt anybody. But as a leader, what would I be modeling? Even if they never knew, I knew. And so I told them the truth, and they forgave me. And next time they're faced with the same decision, maybe they'll do the same thing. As a leader goes, so goes the people.

VI. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained!" 11:1-6

The final area he covers is in 11:1-6.

"Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. If

the clouds are full they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good."

Many a sermon has been preached from this passage on giving. But I'm not sure that's the point. Notice he emphasizes the uncertainty of life. **"You do not know what misfortune may occur,"** he says. **"You do not know the activity of God who makes all things."** Finally, **"you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed."** There is a lot we don't know.

That fact might cause us to live in fear, or even despair. The fear of what might happen, or what might not happen, can be paralyzing. We might never venture out and try to make friends because someone could get hurt. We could never step out and try to use talents or our spiritual gifts because maybe people won't appreciate them. We might never make a financial investment because we could lose it all. We could never plant a garden because harsh weather might destroy our work.

The Teacher is saying don't live that way. Yes, what's going to happen is going to happen ("wherever the tree falls, there it lies"), but if you stand around and watch the wind, you'll never gain anything. And so, cast your bread on the surface of the waters, and divide your portion to seven, or even to eight. Diversify. Take a risk. Be adventurous. Don't stand around and wait for something to happen. Sow your seed in the morning, and don't be idle in the evening. If you're unemployed, put together a resumé, get it in circulation, make those phone calls. If you have an idea for a ministry, go for it.

Jesus told a story about a wealthy man who was to go on a journey. He called together his slaves and he gave each of them some money, according to their ability. To one he gave \$5,000, to another he gave \$2,000, and to another \$1,000. While he was gone, the one with \$5,000 put that money to work and it grew to \$10,000. The one with \$2,000 did the same thing and doubled his master's money as well. But the one with \$1,000 decided to play it safe. He said to himself, "My master is a tough man. If I lose this money, I'll be in serious trouble. So I'm going to play it safe." He put that money in a safe place and waited for his master to return. When his master finally came back, he commended the first two and gave them even more, but he rebuked the one who played it safe. He took away all that he'd given him, and threw him out of the house.

The Teacher is making a similar point. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." If God has given you something, put it to use. If you don't use it, you'll lose it. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you'll find it after many days.

CONCLUSION

When I was a kid, one of my first cars was a Beetle. One of the great things about the Beetle was that it was so easy to work on. A book was published for guys like me who normally didn't work on cars and weren't mechanically inclined, but because they owned a Beetle wanted to try. It was called, "How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Step By Step Manual For Complete Idiots." No one likes to be called an idiot, but for guys like me, it was just what I needed. Unfortunately, I never really used it.

When it comes to wisdom, none of us are very good at it. None of us, in and of ourselves, are inclined in that way. That's why, whether we admit it or not, we all need a step by step idiot's guide to wisdom. And that's what the Teacher has given us here. "Keep your head...Work smarter, not harder...Watch your words...As the leader goes, so goes the people...Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

The question is, will we use it? Will we work at it? Will we open the book and follow the directions? Wisdom is the one skill we can't afford to neglect.

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