

# **Living a Meaningful Life**

## **Wisdom Superior to Folly**

*Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20*

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# Wisdom Superior to Folly

## Scripture

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes urges his readers to use wisdom, especially in the political arena, to navigate their way through life.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20:

<sup>13</sup> I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. <sup>14</sup> There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. <sup>15</sup> But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. <sup>16</sup> But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

<sup>17</sup> The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. <sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

<sup>10:1</sup> Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give  
off a stench;  
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

<sup>2</sup> A wise man's heart inclines him to the right,  
but a fool's heart to the left.

<sup>3</sup> Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks  
sense,  
and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

<sup>4</sup> If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not  
leave your place,  
for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.

<sup>5</sup> There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: <sup>6</sup> folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. <sup>7</sup> I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.

<sup>8</sup> He who digs a pit will fall into it,

- and a serpent will bite him who breaks  
through a wall.
- <sup>9</sup> He who quarries stones is hurt by them,  
and he who splits logs is endangered by  
them.
- <sup>10</sup> If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen  
the edge,  
he must use more strength,  
but wisdom helps one to succeed.
- <sup>11</sup> If the serpent bites before it is charmed,  
there is no advantage to the charmer.
- <sup>12</sup> The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,  
but the lips of a fool consume him.
- <sup>13</sup> The beginning of the words of his mouth is  
foolishness,  
and the end of his talk is evil madness.
- <sup>14</sup> A fool multiplies words,  
though no man knows what is to be,  
and who can tell him what will be after him?
- <sup>15</sup> The toil of a fool wearies him,  
for he does not know the way to the city.
- <sup>16</sup> Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,  
and your princes feast in the morning!
- <sup>17</sup> Happy are you, O land, when your king is the  
son of the nobility,  
and your princes feast at the proper time,  
for strength, and not for drunkenness!
- <sup>18</sup> Through sloth the roof sinks in,  
and through indolence the house leaks.
- <sup>19</sup> Bread is made for laughter,  
and wine gladdens life,  
and money answers everything.
- <sup>20</sup> Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king,  
nor in your bedroom curse the rich,  
for a bird of the air will carry your voice,  
or some winged creature tell the matter. (Ec-  
clesiastes 9:13–10:20)

## Introduction

Senator John Edwards was a rising star in the political world just a few years ago. With uncommon good looks, an uncanny po-

litical ability, and an American dream story, he seemed destined to be the future President of the United States of America. In fact, he was Senator John Kerry's running mate in 2004 when they lost to the Bush-Cheney ticket. Senator Edwards started posturing himself for a 2008 run at the presidency when allegations started surfacing about an extra-marital affair. At first no-one wanted to believe it. Eventually, a child was born that was said to be the child of Senator Edwards. One of Senator Edwards's campaign team members, Andrew Young, initially admitted to being the father. Later Andrew Young recanted and wrote a book detailing how Senator Edwards had asked him to pose as the father (which was not true) so that the heat would be taken off the Senator.<sup>1</sup> And so, one of the most promising political careers was brought to a crashing halt through a foolish dalliance into adultery.

Of course, Senator Edwards's adulterous affair was eventually highly publicized. It is easy to point accusatory fingers at public figures. However, do we ever hurt ourselves through foolish behaviors? Do we always use our God-given wisdom to act wisely?

The writer of Ecclesiastes, known as Qoheleth or the Preacher, recognized that people in his day did not always use God-given wisdom to act wisely. This was particularly true in the political arena. And so the Preacher urged his readers to use wisdom, especially in the political arena, to navigate their way through life.

## Lesson

In today's lesson, then, we are urged to use wisdom, especially in the political arena, to navigate our way through life.

### **I. Since a Little Folly Ruins the Strength of Wisdom in Politics, Use Wisdom in Your Political Dealings (9:13-10:4)**

First, since a little folly ruins the strength of wisdom in poli-

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Young, *The Politician: An Insider's Account of John Edwards's Pursuit of the Presidency and the Scandal That Brought Him Down* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2010).

tics, use wisdom in your political dealings.

The Preacher begins in Ecclesiastes 9:13, **“I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.”** Then he tells a story in verse 14: **“There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it.”** Note the contrast of **“a little city with few men in it”** and **“a great king . . . building great siegeworks against it.”** Humanly speaking, the **little city with few men in it** didn’t stand a chance against a **great king** who was **building great siegeworks against it**. But, as the Preacher reminded us in Ecclesiastes 9:11, **“the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.”** So we may be in for a surprise.

Verse 15a, **“But there was found in it [the city] a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city.”** We are told twice in verse 15 that the man was poor. He did not have any financial resources. He was dirt poor. But he did have wisdom, **and he by his wisdom delivered the city**. We are not told what he did to deliver the city, just that he delivered it **by his wisdom**.

But then follows the sad ending to this story in verse 15b, **“Yet no one remembered that poor man.”** Proverbs 10:7a says that **“the memory of the righteous is a blessing.”** But in reality the righteous are not always remembered. In this case, **no one remembered that poor man**.

The Preacher draws the following conclusion from this story in verse 16, **“But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man’s wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.”** Apparently, there was a familiar proverb in the Preacher’s day that said, **“Wisdom is better than might.”** That is like our proverb, **“Brains are better than brawn.”** Wisdom is stronger than might, but it is often **despised** and **not heard**.

But even so the Preacher insists in verse 17, **“The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.”** The loudest voice is not always right. It is often more likely to be quietly spoken words of truth.

And so the Preacher reiterates in verse 18a, **“Wisdom is bet-**

**ter than weapons of war.”** Wisdom can deliver a city even when it is surrounded by great siegeworks and weapons of war. **“But,”** the Preacher adds in verse 18b, **“one sinner destroys much good.”** It takes only one foolish bungler to destroy much good.

An example of this is King Rehoboam when he succeeded his father Solomon. His older counselors advised him to “lighten the hard service” Solomon had placed on the people. But Rehoboam disregarded their wise counsel and turned to his younger counselors. Their advice to him was for Rehoboam to say to the people, “And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions” (1 Kings 12:11). Rehoboam followed this foolish advice and, as a result, lost ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. It only takes one sinner to destroy much good.

In Ecclesiastes 10:1a the Preacher summarizes his point with another proverb, **“Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a stench.”** In English we would say, “One rotten apple spoils the whole bushel.” A few dead flies can spoil a large, expensive batch of perfume. **“So,”** the Preacher says, **“a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor”** (10:1b). We say, “An ounce of folly outweighs a pound of wisdom.” In the political arena, a little foolishness often has a greater impact than wisdom and honor. The point, then, is that especially in politics, a little folly can easily ruin the strength of wisdom.

Why is wisdom so vulnerable to folly? It is because wisdom and folly are diametrically opposed to each other. The Preacher says in verse 2, **“A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left.”** As much as a politically conservative person might like this verse, it is not speaking about “conservative” versus “liberal” in the political sense. And with apologies to left-handers, the Bible generally treats the right side as the good side. One commentator points out that “the right hand was associated with a strength which saves, supports and protects.”<sup>2</sup> In ad-

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<sup>2</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 133.

dition, the right hand was used to convey blessing, such as the time that Jacob crossed his arms to place his right hand on Ephraim's head and thus give him the greater blessing (Genesis 48:13-20; cf. Proverbs 3:16). The right hand was also associated with authority, which is why Jesus sits on the right hand of the Father (e.g., Colossians 3:1). Given this background, it is not surprising that at the final judgment, the sheep will be on the right, but the goats will be on the left (Matthew 25:31-33).

And so when the Preacher says that the fool's heart inclines him to the left, he is therefore telling us that the man is going in the wrong direction in his life. In fact, the Preacher puts it this way in verse 3, **“Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.”** This reminds us of Proverbs 12:23b, which says that “the heart of fools proclaims folly.” A fool is easy to spot.

In verse 4 the Preacher comes back to the foolish ruler. He says, **“If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.”** A fool might respond in anger, but a calm, wise response **will lay great offenses to rest.** That echoes Proverbs 15:1, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” That is wisdom: responding to anger with a “soft answer,” that is, with calmness.

So, first, since a little folly ruins the strength of wisdom in politics, use wisdom in your political dealings.

## **II. Since a Little Folly Can Overturn the Political Order as Well as Daily Life, Use Wisdom in Your Daily Walk (10:5-11)**

Second, since a little folly can overturn the political order as well as daily life, use wisdom in your daily walk.

The Preacher begins in the political arena in verse 5, **“There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler.”** The evil turns out to be the overturning of the political order. Verse 6, **“Folly is set in many high**

**places, and the rich sit in a low place.”** The Preacher is saying that incompetent fools have been promoted to places of leadership. The very people who, according to verse 3, lack sense have become rulers. And the rich, that is, the wealthy who are well educated and who normally rule, are sitting in a low place. The Preacher confirms this upside-down world in verse 7, **“I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.”**

But it is not only in the political world where wisdom is needed. The Preacher gives four illustrations of what may happen in our lives when we don't use wisdom.

The first illustration of what may happen in our lives when we don't use wisdom is found in verse 8a, **“He who digs a pit will fall into it.”** The **pit** here refers to a trap for animals. In the Preacher's day hunters would make a **pit** and camouflage it so that an animal would fall into it. But if the hunter was foolish and did not pay attention to where he had dug his **pit**, he could easily fall into it and get hurt.

The second illustration of what may happen in our lives when we don't use wisdom is found in verse 8b, **“And a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.”** Even today in Israel you will often see stone walls around orchards and vineyards. If the farmer was not careful, he could be bitten by a deadly snake nesting in the cracks in the wall. A little folly could result in death.

The third illustration of what may happen in our lives when we don't use wisdom is found in verse 9a, **“He who quarries stones is hurt by them.”** Stones were frequently used for building walls and also houses. A person could easily be hurt if he was not careful.

And the fourth illustration of what may happen in our lives when we don't use wisdom is found in verse 9b, **“And he who splits logs is endangered by them.”** Again, splitting logs can be dangerous, especially if a person does not use caution and wisdom.

In the next two verses the Preacher encourages us to use our God-given wisdom in our daily walk. First, he says in verse 10, **“If**



**the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed.”** Do you remember the story about two men chopping down trees? They both started out strong and fast. But after a while the first man stopped chopping and took time to sharpen his blade. The second man thought that he would easily beat the first man. Every so often the first man would stop and sharpen his blade. At the end of the day, the first man had chopped down many more trees than the second man. Why? Because the first man had taken time to sharpen his ax regularly, whereas the second man’s blade was blunt and could no longer perform properly. Thus, **wisdom helps one to succeed.**

And second, the Preacher says in verse 11, **“If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.”** Frankly, I don’t get snake charming! But that is probably because I don’t like snakes. Nevertheless, snake charming is still an occupation in certain parts of the world. A wise person will take time to make sure that the snake is properly charmed, whereas a foolish person will not take the time to charm the snake properly. He will get bitten, and that of course **is no advantage to the foolish charmer.**

So, first, since a little folly ruins the strength of wisdom in politics, use wisdom in your political dealings. Second, since a little folly can overturn the political order as well as daily life, use wisdom in your daily walk.

### **III. Since a Little Folly Can Get You into Deep Trouble, Use Wisdom in Your Daily Walk (10:12-20)**

And third, since a little folly can get you into deep trouble, use wisdom in your daily walk.

The Preacher begins by contrasting the talk of the wise and the babble of fools. He says in verse 12, **“The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.”** When Jesus first preached in his hometown synagogue in

Nazareth, the people's first reaction was favorable. We read in Luke 4:22a, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." **The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor**, that is, they bring the favor of other people upon him. But, by contrast, **the lips of a fool consume him**. Proverbs 18:7 says, "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul." Fools get caught in their own words.

The Preacher continues his description of fools in verse 13, "**The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness.**" Fools are blind to their folly, even when things go from bad to worse for them. Worse yet, "**A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?**" (10:14). Fools even think that they know the future but, in fact, no one does.

In verse 15 the Preacher adds, "**The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.**" Not knowing the way to the city is an idiom for incompetence. Fools don't know the most elementary things.

The Preacher now comes back to the political realm. He contrasts the upside-down political order with one that is rightside-up. He says in verses 16-17, "**Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!**" It is a blessed thing when leaders in government work responsibly for the people they serve.

The Preacher expands on the foolishness of the upside-down political order. The princes in verse 16 who feast in the morning are not only foolish but lazy: they spend their days partying instead of working. And so the Preacher points out what happens in verse 18, "**Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.**" Houses with flat roofs require enormous maintenance and care. If not carefully attended to, they would quickly start leaking.

Nations with an upside-down political order is like a house

that is not maintained. The leaders are incompetent and partying. The Princes say, in verse 19, **“Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.”** This may have been a drinking song that they sang at their feasts. They are totally focused on the good times they can have for themselves.

Meanwhile, no one is looking after the nation. People suffer. People become more and more frustrated with the king and his cronies. They are even tempted to curse the king. But the Preacher warns in verse 20, **“Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.”** Careless talk could get you into big trouble.

So, first, since a little folly ruins the strength of wisdom in politics, use wisdom in your political dealings. Second, since a little folly can overturn the political order as well as daily life, use wisdom in your daily walk. And third, since a little folly can get you into deep trouble, use wisdom in your daily walk.

## Conclusion

The easiest way to remember the message of the Preacher is to think of the three kinds of creatures he has mentioned in this passage: flies, snakes, and birds. Dead flies spoil a lot of precious ointment; little snakes can kill a big person; and a little bird can tell the king your secret thoughts and get you into big trouble. Just like these little creatures, a little folly can do a lot of harm.

Jesus urged a similar message as the Preacher when he said in Matthew 10:16, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be *wise* as serpents and innocent as doves.”

As followers of Jesus Christ, use your God-given wisdom to navigate your way through life!



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
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**PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

We are a people who are so prone to fail to use our God-given wisdom in life. We undercut the strength of wisdom with folly.

Would you help us to use wisdom, especially in the political arena, to navigate our way through life.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as followers of Jesus Christ, use your God-given wisdom to navigate your way through life!