

“Wisdom Before the King Part 2
Ecclesiastes 10:4-20
(Preached at Trinity, January 21, 2024)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citation will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Wisdom has been a significant theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon wrote in **Chapter 1**.
Ecclesiastes 1:13 NAU - "And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven."
2. It is an important subject because we live in a world of foolishness. It is one of the consequences of our sinful nature. Apart from Christ we are all fools.
Romans 1:21-22 NAU - "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,"
As Christians we should see wisdom as a great treasure and pray for it continually. It is the ability to discern God's Word and rightly apply it to life. It is the ability to look upon the world from a Biblical perspective.
3. In **Chapter 10** Solomon continues his discourse on this important subject. In **Verses 1-3** Solomon warned of the danger of even the smallest degree of foolishness. He compared it to dead flies in a jar of ointment. A single dead fly can ruin the perfume and make it stink.
4. Much attention has been given to personal instruction on how to be wise and avoid folly. Beginning with **Verse 4** Solomon gives instruction on how to handle the foolishness of others, particularly the foolishness of our political leaders. In **Verse 5** he refers to leaders who lack wisdom as an evil. How are we as citizens to handle ourselves in the face of foolish leaders?
5. As we continue to consider the subject of civil authority we need to understand there are responsibilities placed upon both the magistrate and the citizen—both upon the one who is called to lead and the one who is charged to follow. This is true of all forms of authority—parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and slaves, elders and church members. All have a position God has called them to maintain.
 - A. The civil magistrate has the duty to lead with justice and equity while administering God's Law.
 - B. Citizens have the duty to submit to the authority of the civil magistrate in obedience.
1 Peter 2:13-14 NAU - "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right."

6. We can also see the duty of both in this passage before us.
Ecclesiastes 10:4-6 NAU - "If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses. ⁵ There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler-- ⁶ folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places."
- A. The magistrate has the duty to rule with fairness and without tyranny.
 The indication here is that the leader has abandoned his position by ruling with harshness.
Verse 4 - "If the ruler's temper rises against you"
- B. As a citizen, we are to stand before our leaders with respect and patience, remembering God's charge of submission upon us. That is our proper position. That is our place.
 "If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position."
- C. The ruler has his place. The subject has his place.
7. When either abandons their place chaos can ensue. This is true when the magistrate begins to rule by tyranny and domination that we've often seen with dictatorships. It is also true when the citizens exhibit lawlessness, rebelling against their leaders.
8. From here to the end of the chapter I want us to patiently follow what Solomon is seeking to teach us regarding wisdom in both those God calls to be in authority as well as those God calls to be under authority. Usually, I develop an outline of 2-4 of the main points from the passage. This passage does not lend itself to this approach. We'll just make our way through each section to the end.
9. **Verses 8-9** might seem completely disconnected from the previous verses. Solomon suddenly changes his discourse to discuss unexpected events in our life. It seems like a sudden change of topic in this current passage, but Solomon is actually maintaining his topic of wisdom and folly in the context of magistrates and citizens. When either fail to maintain their rightful place there will be negative consequences.
10. The "digging a pit" theme is used often in the OT. It usually refers to some nefarious act of an evil man digging a pit in order to entrap his victim, but his intentions turn back upon himself. He falls into his own pit.
Proverbs 26:27-28 NAU - "He who digs a pit will fall into it, And he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him. ²⁸ A lying tongue hates those it crushes, And a flattering mouth works ruin."
Psalms 7:15-16 NAU - "He has dug a pit and hollowed it out, And has fallen into the hole which he made. ¹⁶ His mischief will return upon his own head"
Psalms 35:7-8 NAU - "For without cause they hid their net for me; Without cause they dug a pit for my soul. ⁸ Let destruction come upon him unawares, And let the net which he hid catch himself; Into that very destruction let him fall."
11. The Book of Amos equates such things with God's judgment.
Amos 5:18-20 NAU - "Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, For what purpose *will* the day of the LORD *be* to you? It *will be* darkness and not light; ¹⁹ As when a man flees from a lion And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall And a snake bites him. ²⁰ *Will* not the day of the LORD *be* darkness instead of light, Even gloom with no brightness in it?"

12. Some interpret these verses independently of the previous verses. They interpret them as random unexpected events that we may experience in life. We must always be prepared for the unexpected.
This is a possible interpretation. Wisdom literature sometimes changes course suddenly. We can see this in the Book of Proverbs.
While this might be a possible interpretation, it seems best to follow the course of other “falling into a pit” passages and see it in the context of the previous verses. In other words, when we fail to give heed to our proper place, either as magistrate or citizen, we may find it come back upon our own head.
13. **Ecclesiastes 10:8-9 NAU** - "He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. ⁹ He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them."
Beware, lest while seeking to undermine your opponent, you fall into your own pit.
Beware, lest while seeking to forcibly break through the wall, you meet with an unintended consequence—you meet up with a serpent.
Beware, lest while quarrying stones for your own fortress, you are crushed when one falls.
Beware, lest while splitting logs for your building, you are injured in the process.
A failure to live according to God’s Word will always lead to our hurt.
14. **Ecclesiastes 10:10 NAU** - "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."
With wisdom we are able bear fruit without force or brutality.
With folly, even with great effort your schemes will ultimately fail.
Wisdom has the advantage of giving success.
15. The wise do everything in its proper time and place. Solomon uses the example of a snake charmer. A snake charmer convinces his audience that he has control of the snake. Handling the snake improperly ends in being bit – there isn’t much profit in that.
Ecclesiastes 10:11 NAU - "If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer."
16. Solomon’s words speak to wisdom and duty, to respect and service—both to those in authority and those they serve.
A. Wisdom teaches those in authority how to lead. It teaches a leader how to manage a people ready to revolt. As wise fathers are careful not to exasperate their children, wise leaders must be careful not to provoke those under their authority.
B. Wisdom teaches us how to be good citizens. It instructs us to know how to obey laws we disagree with and gives us discernment to determine when disobedience is not only proper but necessary.
17. **Verses 12-14** speak on the matter of words.
Verse 12 wise men speak gracious words while fools speak words that consume.
In our age of the internet words can have a huge impact on our lives. There is endless misinformation. Most under the age of 30 get the majority of their news from social media. This often proved damaging during the pandemic. You didn’t know what to believe because of the flood of misinformation, and it continues almost four years later.
The lies of our politicians do not serve to strengthen the nation.
And the lies spread by the public also do great harm.
Fools speak endlessly to no purpose and for no good.
As we read in **Verse 7**, a man’s words can fall back on his own head.

- Ecclesiastes 10:12-13 NAU** - "Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; ¹³ the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness."
18. This takes us back to **Verse 4**.
 "do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses."
 The word for "composure" in **Verse 4** refers to health and healing.
Proverbs 12:18 NAU - "There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing."
Proverbs 16:24 NAU - "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."
19. **Verse 14** describes the endless speaking by fools. They have little control over their tongue and they see little virtue in silence.
 "Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?"
- A. The events of **Verses 8-9** describe the unexpected—falling into your own hole, the unexpected snake, the sudden falling of a rock upon your head, a piece of wood flying up and hitting you. Our actions can have unintended consequences.
- B. We need to understand the power and impact of our words. They can do as much harm to ourselves as others.
20. **Verses 15-18** – Solomon touches on the curse of the foolish again.
- A. They can't even comprehend the most basic questions, like how to find the entrance to the city – **Verse 15**. Oh how this speaks to the spiritual condition of billions of souls upon this earth, who although the way to eternal life is plainly proclaimed, they still fail to comprehend the way.
John 14:4-6 NAU - "And you know the way where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."
- B. **Verse 16** describes the woe of immature leaders—they are but children in wisdom. Not knowing the basic issues of life.
 The princes gorge themselves as soon as they rise in the morning.
Isaiah 3:11-12 NAU - "Woe to the wicked! *It will go badly with him*, For what he deserves will be done to him. ¹² O My people! Their oppressors are children, And women rule over them. O My people! Those who guide you lead *you* astray And confuse the direction of your paths."
21. How blessed is the land who has wise, discerning leaders. Leaders who can discipline themselves. Instead of devoting their energy to their lusts, they know how to act at the appropriate time for the good of the land. Oh how we need men of prudence and self-control. We need true statesmen who know how to serve the nation rather than only seeking for the nation to serve them.
 Self-serving leaders is why our nation is now burdened with an impossible debt that will consume us.
Ecclesiastes 10:17 NAU - "Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time-- for strength and not for drunkenness."

22. **Verse 18** speaks of the importance of hard work. When our leaders become negligent in their duty the land will suffer. When our leaders use their office for personal gain our nation suffers. And when the numbers of such multiply we are consumed.
Ecclesiastes 10:18 NAU - "Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks."
23. **Verse 19** describes life when all attention is placed upon fleshly enjoyment – feasting and drinking. And money is the answer to everything.
If you want to get elected just make the promise of giving whatever people want. Promises win elections and voters love having their ears tickled.
Promise forgiveness for student loans, spend more on education (LA spends almost 12g per student, NY spends almost 25g per student), promise cheap health care, subsidies for everything . . . there's a little Robin Hood in all of us – rob the rich and give to the poor. All is well as long as I am the one receiving.
Money is the answer to everything.
24. **Verse 20** – some final wisdom.
- A. Watch what you say. Nothing is secret. Your words can come back to harm you. We've often seen open mic debacles where a politician makes an inappropriate comment thinking the microphone is turned off only to find out his words are being heard by all.
By your words you can fall into your own pit. God commands us to guard our words. This was particularly important in an absolute monarchy that characterized most nations when Solomon wrote these words. Speaking against the king could be considered treasonous.
Verse 28 - "You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people."
- B. Our words will travel and be repeated by others. Once they leave our lips we have no control over them. Gossip can become more venomous as it travels from person to person.

Conclusion:

1. Once again Solomon proves his wisdom. He is writing as a king. He knew the duties of the king and of the citizen.
2. These are timeless truths. We need to hear them in our generation. God has provided that all men be under authority. We are lawless by nature. Wisdom teaches us to be submissive, even when we disagree with our leaders.
Romans 13:5-7 NAU - "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor."