

Wisdom or Foolishness before the Ruler?

Ecclesiastes 10:12-15; 1 Corinthians 1:23-24

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We should always seek to be wise in the way in which we speak and act to any person. But when we speak foolishly or act foolishly to those who have a lawful authority over us, we aggravate our sin greatly. For those who have lawful authority over us represent God in the various institutions of the family, church, and state. So to misrepresent what a friend has said or to speak evil of him is foolish and sinful, but to misrepresent and speak evil of lawful rulers (whether a parent, a husband, a minister, an elder, or a magistrate) is a more heinous sin, because of whom lawful rulers represent: namely, the one true living God.

In Question 151 of the Larger Catechism, it is asked:

What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?

The answer in part given to this question is stated as follows:

Sins receive their aggravations . . . from the parties offended: against superiors, men of eminency, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto. . . .

Of course, that is not to say that rulers do not also aggravate their sin when sin is committed against those whom they are bound to feed and protect. In either case, whether the sin is directed against a lawful ruler or against one who is ruled, the sin is more heinous (aggravated) because of the covenant relationship that exists between the one lawfully ruling and the one ruled.

To curse a neighbor is a grievous sin, but to curse a parent lays bare the very foundation of God's rule over His people, and was according to Christ a crime worthy of death ("For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and he that curseth father or mother, let him die the death" Matthew 15:4). So, likewise, neither lawful ecclesiastical rulers nor lawful civil rulers are to be slandered or reviled (Acts 23:5; Ecclesiastes 10:20). In our immediate context of Ecclesiastes 10, we have noted that the theme of this chapter is that of wisdom vs. foolishness, as it relates to the exercise of and submission to lawful government. Note that Ecclesiastes 10:4 begins this section speaking about the lawful ruler: "If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place." And Ecclesiastes 10:20 ends this section speaking about the lawful ruler: "Curse not the king." How are those who lawfully rule and those who are ruled to speak and to conduct themselves in displaying the wisdom of God to the benefit and profit of God's Kingdom and to their own benefit and profit?

Let us consider from our text in Ecclesiastes 10:12-15 the following main points: (1) The Madness of the Fool in His Speech (Ecclesiastes 10:12-13); (2) The Endless Ignorance of the Fool in His Speech (Ecclesiastes 10:14); and (3) The Fruitlessness of the Fool in His Speech (Ecclesiastes 10:15).

I. The Madness of the Fool in His Speech (Ecclesiastes 10:12-13).

A. In the previous section (Ecclesiastes 10:8-11), Solomon labored to demonstrate the sin and folly of those who are ruled in seeking to remove a lawful government from over them, and the grace of those who are ruled by a lawful government and who exercise wisdom in promoting godly government by way of humble submission. In the passage that is now before us, Solomon labors to demonstrate the folly of those who by their speech undermine and subvert lawful government.

B. Solomon begins with a contrast in Ecclesiastes 10:12 between the speeches of one who is wise

and one who is foolish in addressing those who are lawful rulers.

1. The wise person utters words to his/her superior that are gracious, even seeking to turn away the lawful ruler's wrath by a soft answer—not returning harsh words for harsh words, as if one is in some kind of a contest to see who can outlast the other in getting in the last scornful, offensive word (“The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious” Ecclesiastes 10:12).

a. Dear ones, controlling and restraining your tongue, our pen, and your keyboard in the heat of a disagreement is the work of God's grace—not merely the work of your natural temperament. Heavenly wisdom is a supernatural grace purchased for God's people by the death of Christ. Heavenly wisdom (like all other graces) is not earned or deserved, but rather is freely implanted in you at the time of your regeneration and exercised by faith in Christ as you humbly recognize your desperate need of heavenly wisdom in applying God's knowledge and truth to all areas of your life (James 1:5-6). Without the exercise of heavenly wisdom, we will continue to act like fools in making a mess of our lives and in bringing reproach upon the name of Christ. For it is by heavenly wisdom that God brings order out of chaos, peace out of hostility, gentleness out of harshness, mercy out of vindictiveness, impartiality out of favoritism, and sincerity out of hypocrisy (James 1:14-18).

b. A most conspicuous outward evidence of the inward work of God's grace of wisdom in your life is the use of gracious lips with others (“The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious” Ecclesiastes 10:12). Dear ones, your words are a mirror to your soul. Consider the sobering words of the Lord Jesus in regard to the use of your words from Matthew 12:34-37. You may carefully guard your words toward your spouse or your children when you are in public, but how do you use your words when you are at home with your family? Do you let down your hair (as it were) and speak to one another with words and anger that you would not even dare to use with a stranger (Ephesians 4:29)? What have you said or written this week that was not gracious or that was not speaking the truth out of love for your wife, husband, children, parent, or fellow Christian? Without the gracious work of God's Spirit slowing you down in your responses and reactions to others, you will say or write whatever comes to your mind (which will not minister grace, edification, and encouragement, but rather harm and destruction to others).

c. When Solomon states that the wise person's words are gracious, you are not to understand gracious words as always being sweet and candy-coated. No, sometimes gracious words are firm, direct, and convicting, and shoot like an arrow to the heart (Colossians 4:6). However, gracious words always intend and endeavor to minister grace, edification, and encouragement to others, even when they are strong medicine. In your present context (Ecclesiastes 10:12-15), you must not forget that gracious words are not disrespectful words to those who hold lawful offices over you. Gracious words speak the truth in love, and gracious words realize that those who hold lawful offices of authority represent God. Thus, to show contempt and disrespect for those in the family, church, or state that are lawful rulers on behalf of the Lord is to show contempt and disrespect for God Himself. That is the reason for the severity of judgment that fell upon Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16:1-3.

2. Moving from what Solomon says about the wise person, listen to what Solomon says about the fool and his use of speech in Ecclesiastes 10:12: “But the lips of a fool will swallow him up.”

a. The emphasis here is not so much on the effect that foolish words will have on others (though the destruction brought to others by one who utters foolish words is indeed devastating), but rather the consequences that will befall the fool who utters them. What a graphic picture we have here painted for us by Solomon. Solomon says that when we use our lips to utter that which is destructive to others (rather than gracious to others), it is as if we took our lips and stretched them back over our heads and swallowed ourselves. You see, dear ones, your destructive words not only hurt others (which is heinous), but Solomon says your destructive words hurt you as well. Thus, the pain you seek to inflict upon others by your angry, vindictive words ends up eating you alive. Why? Because angry, hurtful words do not resolve the problem and so your sinful passion continues to burn within, spending more and more time feeding your sinful

passion, reflecting further on more destruction to heap upon others by your words. You become consumed and swallowed up with bitterness and anger until you destroy yourself. Husbands and wives, remember that what you say to one another either helps you or destroys you, because you are one flesh. You cannot bless your husband or wife without blessing yourself, and you cannot hurt your husband or wife without hurting yourself. Why are we so self-destructive? Because, dear ones, the wicked desire to hurt one another and to get even is greater than the gracious desire to see ourselves blessed by God and others. That is the self-destructive nature of sin. That is swallowing yourself up with your own lips, and this is particularly addressed by Solomon when you are speaking to those who have lawful authority over you. A fool by his disrespectful and disloyal words to those who have lawful authority lays a snare against his own peace, joy, contentment, and life (Proverbs 8:36).

b. Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 10:13 that the self-destructive nature of your own words that you utter against others is really “madness”—it is irrational—it is crazy—it is insanity—because it is self-destructive, and it is against nature for a man to hate and to destroy his own flesh (Ephesians 5:29). If you do not learn by God’s grace to control your tongue, it inevitably will lead to a kind of self-destructive insanity. Watch over your words. Begin each day beseeching the Lord to control your tongue by His grace and refusing to allow words to proceed from your mouth while you are filled with anger. Count to a hundred. Take a walk. But especially cry out to the Lord to control your tongue and to use your tongue to speak grace to others as Christ has spoken grace to you. Remember that once those words are out of your mouth or sent by your computer, they are like feathers blown in every direction by the wind. Many more people will hear the foolishness you have uttered. Your name, reputation, and trust will suffer such a direct hit that it may take a very long time to repair the damage done to yourself—to your own pain and heartache (not to mention the pain and heartache done to others).

II. The Endless Ignorance of the Fool in His Speech (Ecclesiastes 10:14).

A. Another characteristic of the fool in his/her speech to superiors is that he/she multiplies words, and thereby reveals ignorance (not knowledge). Generally, the more that we talk, the more we have opportunity to reveal what we do not know (Proverbs 10:19; Proverbs 29:11). Therefore, the wise person chooses his/her words carefully before speaking on a subject. The wise person doesn’t just prattle on with great passion about thoughts off the top of his/her head (Proverbs 15:28).

1. Much passion about a subject does not make up for little knowledge about a subject. Many people have opinions about nearly everything that might come up by way of discussion. They may have a lot of heat, but very little light—a zeal, but not according to knowledge (Romans 10:2).

2. Have you stopped to evaluate recently how much you talk in conversations with others, and how much you listen? Do people walk away from conversations with you, only remembering how much you said, but not really what you said, because you said so much? Dear ones, when you carefully choose your words, you are not only going to say something profitable to others, but what you say will more likely be remembered, because there were far fewer words to remember. Most people can endure only so much talking before they mentally turn down the volume or tune you out. Good listeners are not the voices you hear over others in a crowded room full of people; but good listeners are those who when they do speak, they will have something worth saying and worth listening to. However, those who control conversations, those who interrupt people who are talking, and those who seem to talk without taking a breath, are not good listeners.

3. Dear ones, such behavior only reveals bad manners, rudeness, ungraciousness, foolishness, and pride in acting as though what you have to say is far more important than what anyone else in the conversation has to say. What arrogance is manifested by us at such times in our conversations and discussions with others! How we need to be more thoughtful in what we say and less wordy in what we say.

This is not a mere indiscretion, but an exhibition of sinfully foolish speech on our parts, for which we need to repent and to seek God's forgiveness; for it reveals the root of pride within us when we talk as though we must control the conversation. Whereas a good listener is one who seeks to serve others and can do so because he/she has studied what others are saying and prays for heavenly wisdom to say what will be most edifying. Ask someone you trust (a husband, wife, friend) if you multiply words in conversations? Pray for the grace of heavenly wisdom in controlling your words, especially when you are in the presence of those who hold a lawful office over you, or those who are older and more experienced than yourself. Learn first to be a good listener and student in conversations before you become a good teacher in conversations.

B. In the latter part of Ecclesiastes 10:14, it appears that the sinful speech of the fool focuses so much of the time on that which is purely speculative and theoretical, rather than on that which is practical and factual ("a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him" Ecclesiastes 10:14b).

1. The fool would rather talk about things in the future over which he has no control than about things in the present over which he can exercise a godly control (in dependence upon Christ). The fool would rather talk about deep speculative matters concerning which the Scripture is unclear than about practical duties concerning which the Scripture is very clear.

2. Dear ones, are you one who loves debate for debate's sake, or do you love discussion because it is edifying to the mind and the soul of everyone involved? I am not saying that debate of matters related to theology is not profitable. However, I am saying that when it is a way of promoting your own knowledge and theories at the expense of speaking and conducting yourself in humility and love for others, you have simply become a "sounding brass" and a "tinkling cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). The Lord makes it clear in Ecclesiastes 10:14b that the speculative is not that which will edify or build up one another in godliness. Do you want to be remembered for being the master of that which is theoretical and speculative or being a godly husband or wife, a godly parent or child, or a godly elder or member? Do you want to be remembered for being a good talker or an effectual doer of God's will? Do you want to be remembered for the accumulation of knowledge or the application of knowledge in your own life, in your family, in your job, in your church, and in your nation? These are the kind of men God is looking for in order to be elders in His church. These are men who have learned to control their tongues and to minister grace and truth to others in very practical ways. And a mere academic degree behind a man's name certainly does not assure one that he is growing in the grace of heavenly wisdom in applying the truth in his own life and in the life of his family.

III. The Fruitlessness of the Fool in His Speech (Ecclesiastes 10:15).

A. Finally, Solomon calls this endless talking of the fool his "labor", and rather than the fool being wearied by his/her endless chatter, he/she exhausts and wearies all those who listen to him/her. There is much talking, but little or no results. There is much theory, but little or no application of the truth. Dear ones, much talking about a subject does not guarantee spiritual fruit in your life or mine. We must practice what we preach by God's grace. What is needed is to talk less about what you know and rather to practice more what you know. Beloved, if there is little spiritual fruit that you see in your life, it may be due to the fact that you talk much, but practice the truth very little. It is great that you know and speak the truth. But the truth of Christ is intended to conform you to the blessed image of your wonderful Savior. Dear ones, do you love the beauty of God's holiness, or is the beauty of God's holiness something to merely talk about? Do you desire to be faithful and godly in your family and church, or do you simply discuss what it means to be faithful and godly?

B. Solomon says that after all of the labor expended in the theoretical speech of one who is foolish, he/she cannot apply his/her knowledge to the most practical matters (like how to find the gates of the city). What a pitiful picture this is of the fool. There he/she is uttering lofty words that few understand,

abandoned by everyone, because they have become exhausted at his/her tedious and endless speech, and is lost in the wilderness trying to find the gates of the city.

C. Dear ones, this picture is true of us all by nature. We are all in Adam corrupted with making ourselves look important in the sight of others by seeking to impress others with what we know. Likewise, we are all in Adam lost in the wilderness of our sin, talking much about what we think we know, but unable to find our way to the gates of that heavenly city of God due to our pride. Jesus Christ is wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Jesus Christ is the door and the gate (John 10:9). You cannot find your way to that heavenly city by your own lofty thoughts and by your own proud ideas. The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). The wisdom of God is found in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, wherein you are offered a Savior, who will make you wise unto salvation, who will reveal to you by His law what you deserve for your rebellion against Him (namely, eternal torment in hell), and who will reveal by His gospel the free promise of forgiveness, righteousness, everlasting life, and heavenly wisdom, if you will but trust and rest in Christ alone for your eternal salvation. Dear ones, do you feel like you are wondering aimlessly in the wilderness today in search of that glorious city of God? Turn to Christ right now in faith. He will direct you by His heavenly wisdom to the everlasting city, wherein you will remember no more the pain and heartaches of this life, the sorrow and grief of this life, the tears of this life, the temptation and sin of this life, or the death of this life, but rather will find joy, peace, contentment in the presence of your Savior forevermore. You will finally be at home, never to aimlessly roam any more.

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