

Wise Living in Foolish Times

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[0 : 00] Initially when I read this passage I thought it was the Bible's guidance on how to vote because it says in one of the verses the heart of the wise inclines to the right and the heart of the fool to the left.

But actually the way to understand this is by picturing a leader. Picture a leader in your head but make sure they're a fool. Can you picture an incompetent leader? It probably won't take you too long. A big theme of the passage today is life under foolish leaders. Time and again the verses will talk about how disorganised the land is, about how unqualified types keep getting promoted while the skilled people are left out in the cold. We'll read about a land of neglect and disordered priorities where selfish ambition of the leaders trumps the welfare of the people and none of it will make any sense. But actually like everything else in Ecclesiastes, I think this passage makes perfect sense of the world we see around us and when fools are in charge.

[1 : 08] This passage calls them rulers and kings but you'll be picturing that manager in your office or the politician on TV. You'll be picturing the president or the committee of the local club you belong to, perhaps even leaders of church denominations that you're a part of.

We see foolish leaders all over the place. It's a hallmark of life outside the garden and life under the sun. What hope does wisdom have when it's clearly outnumbered and swimming against a tide of fools?

I think a passage like this is enormously helpful and practical for a time like now when so many leaders are on display. But I think also even if you're not in a workplace or you don't have a problem with politicians per se, I think this passage is just as helpful if you have to deal with fools in your life and I think that's probably all of us.

As we picture that foolish person, the temptation will be to grumble against them. This passage is for us, however. This passage asks us to worry about our own lives rather than pointing fingers and going on witch hunts.

The teacher in this passage will give us the godly and wise way to navigate life in a city of fools. And he begins with a story.

[2 : 34] Look at 9 verse 13. I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it and a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it.

Now there lived in that city a man, poor but wise. And he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that man.

You see, there was a small city with a few people versus a powerful king and his military might. The outcome seems inevitable. But amazingly, that city was saved.

Not by their might, by the wisdom of this poor man. We're not sure exactly who he was or how this was accomplished. But the point is verse 16.

So I said, wisdom is better than strength. It's brains over brawn, as we might say. But the really amazing thing I think happens after the battle, when there's no medal presentations, there's no statues erected of this poor little man because he saved them.

[3 : 43] The teacher says, verse 15, nobody remembered that poor man. His wisdom was despised and his words are no longer heeded. And as you read that little picture, that little story, the parallels to the gospel are quite strong.

So Christians, we are poor and helpless. The enemy is sin, the death and the devil. On our side, all we have is a foolish-sounding gospel and a weak-looking cross.

Instead of people, after things are done, instead of people rushing to ask us how they can be forgiven and how they can get through death, like that poor man, they forget about Jesus and they despise the cross.

They call us the fools. But wisdom is better than strength, especially when it's God's wisdom. Look at 1 Corinthians, which is on your screen.

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Next slide. To those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

[4 : 59] You see, like that poor wise man, the test of God's wisdom is not how impressive it seems to the fools around us, but whether it saves.

And the teacher of Ecclesiastes agrees. He said, The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

Wisdom is understated, underestimated. It's the quiet achiever in a city of fools. Verse 18, 9 verse 18, Wisdom is better than weapons of war.

And that means it is strong. It is effective when trouble strikes. But notice also that wisdom is fragile. Look at 9 verse 18.

But one sinner destroys much good. As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. Just a moment of foolishness can outweigh and undo a wise and godly reputation.

[6 : 06] Think about people like Bill Clinton, the former president, a distinguished life in politics, but one in discretion and reputation in tatters.

Think about the actor or the athlete, the famous person. Just one scandal and it's all over. It is the marital affair.

Years of commitment undone in an instant through a moment of foolishness. In the Bible, remember King David? A wise and honourable, godly man, but a moment with Bathsheba and it's all undone.

Peter, he's the great apostle, but he's still remembered for when he denied Jesus three times in a moment of foolishness. You see, just as a tiny dead fly can ruin a whole bottle of perfume or one bad apple can ruin the whole bunch, so a wise and godly life, a Christian reputation can be undone just with a moment of folly.

And it's because they are totally opposite. 10 verse 2, the heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.

[7 : 25] Even, verse 3 says, even when fools do something simple like walk down the street, they can't help but shout to everyone what a fool they are. Whereas in verse 4, wisdom is calm and quiet and resolute.

If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post. Calmness can lay great offences to rest. I don't know if you've ever had a ruler or a manager lash out at you in anger.

Perhaps a teacher or someone like that falsely accuse you of something you didn't do. The temptation to respond in kind is so great or to destroy their reputation with gossip and innuendo.

But that is foolish because it only escalates the situation. Wisdom is controlled and calm. It diffuses the tension and seeks peace to live to fight another day.

On the slide, in the one Peter reading, do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

[8 : 44] It seems that wisdom and folly are at odds with one another. It's as though folly, foolishness, is trying to knock wisdom off its straight path.

Wisdom is strong and effective but it is fragile. It only takes a moment of foolishness to undo a godly life and a Christian reputation.

And in this city, speaking of reputations, in this city, people walk around, don't they, and they say, I don't care what people think of me. I can do what I like. But is that wise? As Christians, aren't we representing someone and something bigger than ourselves?

Ought not we to care not to bring the gospel into disrepute? We're not to ruin the reputation of the church with a cavalier attitude.

One Peter says this on your screen, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits.

[9 : 52] A wise and godly life can lead a fool to be saved because your quiet, wise example will cause them to glorify God in their own lives.

Look at verse 5. There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler. Fools are put in many high positions while the rich occupy the low ones.

I've seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves. These verses describe an upside down land where fools are promoted while qualified types are subjected to service and perhaps that makes sense of the city you see around you.

Foolish politicians being elected and calling the shots. Perhaps it explains the places you work in or the ones that you have worked in in the past.

Managers, they throw resources at futile projects promoting other fools while you're left out in the cold. Bosses who snap their fingers and expect results with no idea of what it takes the people underneath them to produce.

[11 : 05] And of course, forgetting to give you the credit when things are successful. Perhaps this sort of topsy-turvy order best explains things like the Anglican Diocese or the local club you belong to.

How did the city get so upside down? And the answer is verse 5. Through the foolish error of the ruler. You see, it's a decision there, a budget cut there.

The wrong person promoted here, the right one made redundant over there. And just like that, with just a couple of decisions, a whole organisation, a whole city are upside down and left in ruins. Wisdom is strong and effective but fragile and susceptible to folly. Verse 8 and 9, it's the same idea. Just a little lapse in concentration, you can fall into your own pit. A little bit of a hurry, bashing through a wall, you can be bitten by the snake.

[12 : 10] A little bit of carelessness in the quarry, injured by the stones and so on. A little bit of foolishness can bring on serious injury. And I think that makes wisdom very precious in the world.

Verse 10, when the axe is dull, sure you can bash ahead with brute force but wisdom gives you real success because it knows to sharpen the blade.

And I guess these little proverbs here, I guess they're self-evident, aren't they? Of course you should be careful and not to rush through dangerous situations. Of course you should think your way through a project.

It's strange, isn't it, that the Bible has to contend so strongly for something so obvious as wisdom. The book of Proverbs says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

And in a city like ours where most people don't fear the Lord there won't be many wise and godly examples for us to follow. There won't be that many people who prize godly wisdom because they don't fear the Lord.

[13 : 24] The Christian needs to be vigilant therefore not to be knocked off the wise path. On guard as it were. We said that folly is at odds with wisdom trying to throw us off course and perhaps on guard is how you would describe your posture as you head to the office each day where you have to deal with that person.

Perhaps on guard is how you brace yourself when you go to visit that foolish friend you have. If you're anything like me the big danger area for wisdom will be with words and the speech we have and this is verse 12 onwards.

Look at verse 12. Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious but fools are consumed by their own lips. At the beginning their words are folly at the end they are wicked madness and fools multiply words.

Do you know a fool? Do you know a person who just keeps talking and the more they talk the more they keep digging themselves into trouble and you just say why don't you just quit while you're ahead or behind is the case.

The picture in verse 12 is that they are consumed that is eaten alive eaten up by their words. They have a mouth that just keeps getting them in trouble.

[14 : 52] Do you picture someone like that? Their words start out as foolishness perhaps even a little folksy a little humorous from time to time but by the end of the conversation it descends into wicked madness.

What's worse verse 14 says they multiply their words which means they just can't stop themselves from speaking and eventually getting themselves into trouble.

you see this on social media and Facebook all the time especially amongst Christians as well. Christians we want respect we want to win our friends for the Lord but people I see just keep posting nonsense.

What's worse they post something foolish every other day. They multiply their words as verse 14 says and so they multiply their problems and you can see it happening on the internet almost in real time as their reputation ends up in tatters amongst their friends.

They are gobbled up consumed by their foolish words. Wisdom with our speech is huge. Look at verse 16 and 17 Woe to the land whose king was a servant that is a child and whose princes feast in the morning blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time for strength and not for drunkenness.

[16:21] These verses describe two different lands. One is in ruins because the king is a fool. He's like a servant or a child instead of being a responsible adult.

His land is upside down. His princes they feast and they party in the morning instead of working for the people. They are lazy. Verse 18 their land is like a neglected house whose rafters sag and whose roof leaks just as rafters hold up a roof so people hold up a nation.

But these princes they neglect their welfare and prefer to party for themselves. They scoff at the idea of doing good. Verse 19 a feast is made for laughter wine makes life merry and money is the answer for everything.

Let the good times roll say these foolish rulers. And when leaders are like that the temptation to bash them is so easy especially when they're so inept.

It seems like this passage gives us license to grumble against them. What's more there's not much accountability with our speech is there. Not many people are going to say hey is that the godly way you should be speaking about that leader?

[17:42] Not many people will challenge us like that. Wisdom with our speech is huge. Wisdom with speech is hard especially when leaders can be so foolish.

And so what if we give the poor old politicians a break? What if we give the manager at work a second chance? At the president the committees of the clubs you belong to?

The medical specialist who you thought was there to help you but turned out to be hopeless? It's so easy isn't it? So tempting to lurk in the background and destroy someone's reputation with gossip and innuendo but the teacher warns us to be wise with our speech.

Look at verse 20. Do not revile the king even in your thoughts or curse the rich in your bedroom because a bird in the sky may carry your words and a bird on the wing may report what you say. In other words the walls may have ears and that doesn't mean then that it's okay to gossip as long as you don't get caught. It's extremely foolish to curse the king, extremely unwise to gossip and backstab the boss.

[18:58] careless talk will land us in lots of trouble. Loose lips will damage a Christian reputation. Be wise, stop talking is the idea.

The rector of my old church I used to belong to he used to say I'm not going to talk to you if you talk about that person unless you've spoken to them first and I think that's not a bad start.

What if we spoke about people as if they were standing right in front of us? What if we spoke about people as if our Christian reputation depends on it and God is listening?

Wisdom is effective but it is fragile. It only takes a moment of loose lips to sink ships as they say to sink a Christian reputation.

For some of us that might mean we only get to use half the normal words we would use in a day. Is that something that might explain your speech?

[20:06] If you wouldn't be able to talk about people because they're not with you might that reduce the amount of words you normally say by half? A bit more quiet wouldn't be too high a price to pay to strive for a wise and godly life.

We don't have the time this morning but the rest of the verses in chapter 11 are the big idea is that under these foolish leaders we just don't know what the future will bring.

Verse 1 talks about shipping grain across the sea because in this land under those leaders you won't get a return. Verse 2 talks about spreading, diversifying your money because you just don't know what disaster will come in the economy under these leaders.

Verse 5 says, just as we don't know the path of the wind or how the body is formed so we cannot understand the work of God the maker of all things. We don't understand why God puts these

leaders in positions of power.

We can't always see how they forward his sovereign plans. We can't complain and gossip these leaders away. All we can do is work on ourselves and the teacher holds out wisdom as the way to navigate life in a city of fools.

[21 : 34] In the New Testament reading which we had from 1 Peter the context was similar to that small little city at the start suffering in the face of fools and Peter also cautions wisdom with speech.

He says, do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. He says, keep our tongues from evil and to seek peace and to pursue it.

I wonder what the reaction would be amongst your friends if you responded to their gossip with quiet. What would happen in your workplace if you responded to the boss's anger with calm peacemaking?

like that poor man at the start. Maybe you'd be despised, laugh that and scoff that. But Peter says on the screen, even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

Do not fear their threats, do not be frightened. In your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. Do this with gentleness and respect. Keeping, next slide, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

[22 : 50] It is better, if it's God's will, to suffer for doing good than doing evil. And in case you missed it, the big idea there is suffering for doing good.

And that means being diligent about our behaviour. It means we'll have to guard our tongue and act with one eye on God and one eye on our Christian reputation.

That would be the wise thing to do when you're suffering fools. And obviously it's exactly what Jesus would do. Verse 18 on your screen.

Christ also suffered once for sins. He suffered for doing good as well. The righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirits.

He was like that small city at the start. Through his wisdom his quiet actions he saved even though afterwards he was despised and rejected for it.

[23 : 53] We said that there aren't many examples in a city like this of godly wisdom. Peter says you'll always have Jesus to look up to. He suffered and was despised even by the people he came to save.

He didn't fight back with his words did he? He was quiet and resolute entrusting himself to God. If Jesus can suffer what he suffered for doing good and remain quiet and godly with his words then we can too.

And so let's keep our eyes on him as the example of the quiet and godly and wise way to navigate life in a city of fools so let's pray that we would do that Father God we thank you that your word bears fruit all the time it's always the season and Father please would we be wise and godly please would your word bear fruit in us this morning please would it affect how much we talk the way we talk how we treat and respond to fools especially when they're in charge of us please help us in the workplace please guard our Christian reputations on the internet Father please guard us when we're tempted to bash politicians we don't know why you've organised things the way you have help us to focus on ourselves and be wise and godly with one eye on our Christian reputation we ask this in Jesus name amen