

Living wisely in the face of folly

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[0 : 00] let's pray to God. Father, we pray that you will speak powerfully by your word this morning. We pray that you will help us to walk the way of Jesus and that you would cause us, Lord, to want to live for you and to have the courage to live for you.

So we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Have you ever been in a scenario like this? You are in a discussion group at work with senior management present or perhaps at a forum where the school board, the teachers and the parents are trading views or perhaps at a committee meeting of the society you volunteer at.

Usually you're a little disengaged but today you're paying full attention because today someone is making suggestions and you find yourselves nodding enthusiastically to it.

These are some of the most sensible proposals you've heard in years. And so you even raise your hand and add a few words in support of it.

But when a motion is put forward and it comes to a vote, you're absolutely shocked to discover that it fails. The proposals were perceptive.

[1 : 26] They were full of intelligence and good judgment. But they are rejected. And you feel frustrated. How could such good ideas not see the light of day?

Here's a different scenario. You've been spending your quiet times in the book of Titus recently. And you get to Titus chapter 2 and it says, So you're freshly motivated to make your lifestyle an advertisement for Jesus.

You're eager to do what is right. But to your dismay, your non-Christian friends, far from being attracted to Jesus, don't seem impressed at all with you.

Instead, they make comments like, Wow, why so religious one? And they even mock you a little. All you've been doing is trying to live for Jesus, but you seem to gain nothing.

So now, not only are you a little frustrated, but you've become a little more fearful. You find yourself a little more reluctant to take risks for Jesus.

[2 : 42] Well, today, God, through the teacher, wants to speak into such situations. He wants you to know that you're right to feel frustrated. At the same time, however, He wants to encourage you not to let those frustrations turn into fear.

In today's passage, He's going to show us why we might shrink back from choosing what is wise, while encouraging us to keep doing so, even if it involves risk.

And so let's work through this part of Ecclesiastes, and let the Holy Spirit show their relevance to us for today. So here's the first thing the teacher realizes.

Wisdom should hold the upper hand. In 9 verse 13 to 15, the teacher tells a little story. 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.

- [4 : 02] So notice how good wisdom is. After all, look at both sides represented in this story. On the one hand, you have a city that's small, a population that is sparse, and a man of no significance.
- On the other hand, you have a powerful king with a huge army laying a huge siege. But what is the difference between victory and defeat?
- Answer, wisdom. It's not what position you have or what resources you possess, but wisdom which makes the difference. Now, how exactly this man put his wisdom to work is unknown to us.
- Did he execute a crafty military scheme? Did he manage to negotiate a ceasefire? Did he work out a favourable compromise? We are not told the details.
- But the preliminary point is, wisdom can rescue. There was once a woman who was walking home late at night from her friend's place.
- [5 : 14] Suddenly, she became conscious that three men were following her. She started to break into a cold sweat, but tried to maintain her cool.
- All of a sudden, one of the men grabbed her and began whispering into her ear. But then, a loud voice came through the air, calling her name.
- What are you doing with my girlfriend? She looked up and saw a very tall man, a stranger to her, walking towards them. He then gripped the lady's hand, said loudly, Come on, sweetheart.
- And then, they walked off. Later on, she asked the stranger how he knew her name. The stranger said he didn't. He just simply noticed she was in difficulty, on instinct, used one of the most common names in that country, and pretended to be her boyfriend.
- His quick thinking probably saved her life. Wisdom can rescue. So, if this is what wisdom does, then surely wisdom should have the upper hand in all areas of life.
- [6 : 32] Verse 17 makes sense. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.
- Those who understand how to live skillfully, according to how God has ordered this world, should be the ones we listen to.
- After all, wisdom could literally be the difference between life and death. But here's the second thing the teacher realizes. Folly holds the upper hand instead.
- For as the teacher keeps investigating, he discovers the world often reacts to wisdom in two ways. First of all, it is seldom heeded.
- We should pay attention to the words of the wise, verse 17, but verse 16 tells us that in the case of this poor, wise man, this is exactly what did not happen.
- [7 : 38] He isn't celebrated. Instead, end of verse 15, he's forgotten. In fact, as the Old Testament scholar, Derek Kidner, insightfully points out, that is the big point of this story.
- This is not so much a moral tale to show what people should do. Rather, it is a cautionary tale to show us what people are like.
- And what we can be like is forgetful. We can forget even that which saved us. Think of the butler whom Joseph held back in Genesis chapter 40 while they were both in prison.
- You would have thought the butler would surely repay his debt to Joseph once he's set free, but he completely forgets Joseph. That's what we can be like.
- Not only that, we can be fickle. Look again at verse 16. Sometimes people don't heed wisdom, not by forgetting it, but by despising it.

- [8 : 53] One moment we say, God's ways are the best. They save us after all. But the next we can criticise it as old-fashioned and outdated. All it takes is for one influential leader, whether outside of church or even in church, to loudly raise doubts about God's wisdom in his word, and soon he has a whole crowd eating out of his hands, supporting his position.
- But sometimes, the wisdom of the crowd is not really wise at all. Notice how the crowd is described in verse 17.
- They are fools as well. They have failed to heed wisdom. So according to the teacher, it is legitimate to ask the question that Obi-Wan Kenobi of Star Wars fame once asked.
- Who is the more foolish? The fool or the fool who follows him? So wisdom is seldom heeded.
- Just as frustratingly, second of all, it is easily reversed. Verse 18. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.
- [10 : 23] Here's the thing. Wisdom is valuable, yes, but it is also vulnerable. What takes a long time to be built can be destroyed in one moment.
- You spend the whole week writing an essay, but all it takes is just one second to accidentally press the wrong button, and all your work is deleted, unable to be recovered.
- You spend years investing in your marriage, but you have a little too much to drink one night with your attractive colleague, and relationships are destroyed. You have patient leaders in government who spend years laying the foundation for a thriving, multiracial society.
- But one rebel gives a reckless speech, and all those foundations are swept away. You take a long time to build up that gospel ministry, but one bad apple poisons all the fruit of that gospel work.
- Or, as the teacher puts it, 10 verse 1, just a few dead flies could completely turn you off that award-winning perfume.
- [11 : 38] Wisdom is easily reversed. And, the teacher observes, folly gets the upper hand because in this hebrew world, fools seem to keep getting promoted over the wise.
- Look at 10 verse 6. Fools are put in many high positions while the rich occupy the low ones. Now, at first glance, this looks like a surprising contrast.
- But, just remember that in ancient cultures, the wise men in the royal courts, generally speaking, are those who possess wealth and influence.
- So, the rich, in this case, function as a near synonym for the wise. But, they are the ones held down. I'm sure all of us have seen this in one form or another.
- The bright young man or woman is perceived as a threat. So, rather than treating them as valuable assets, they are relegated to the margins and put into cold storage.
- [12 : 53] Or, take verse 7. I have seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves.
- Again, the issue seems to be one of wrong people in wrong positions. Horses were almost always military animals in the Old Testament.
- And, princes were trained to handle and use them in battle. But, here, it is the untrained and the unskilled slaves who are put on horses.
- They are the ones giving the orders. The princes have to march to them. All their wisdom, all their training, wasted.
- So, verse 5. When fools are in charge, foolishness comes and evil arises.
- [13 : 56] Or, in stronger language, look at verse 16. Woe to the land whose king was a servant. Or, take a look at the footnote. It's actually the king is a child and whose princess feasts in the morning.

When your president or prime minister behaves like an immature child, always throwing tantrums, indulging in baseless fantasies, constantly boasting while being petty, he brings the entire nation down with him.

And yet, in this world, it is often those who couldn't care less about the common man on the street who has their very support.

Wisdom should hold the upper hand, but folly holds it instead. So, what should we do with the teacher's reflections?

Well, let me spell out a few thoughts. For one thing, these verses help calibrate our expectations. They tell us we shouldn't be disheartened whenever we encounter the presence of folly.

[15 : 18] We shouldn't be shocked when it rears its head. It's to be expected as we live our lives here on this earth.

Instead, we should be prepared for it. We should intentionally begin to train ourselves to spot it whenever we see it and to train our children in the same way.

We should recognize that what we read on the internet or on WhatsApp messages is not always wisdom and we shouldn't feed on them.

That requires, of course, doing the hard work of learning more of the Bible, learning how biblical wisdom should frame our way of seeing things, learning how to think of life in biblical categories so that we develop better instincts for what is good or bad, wise or unwise.

We need to patiently listen to what God's Word says to us on everything from politics to ethics. There is no shortcut.

[16 : 29] And these verses help us not to be too disappointed if we do say wise words, if we do make wise decisions and take wise actions but get no recognition for it.

That's how it is. We have to be alright with being forgotten, to be content with obscurity, to remind ourselves that God knows even if no one else does.

We have to acknowledge that biblical wisdom can be rejected. Even in church or in ministry, sometimes we have to bear with it when we see people we care for make decisions we know are not good for their spiritual health or even their general well-being, praying that they won't keep walking down that road.

For these verses remind us that wisdom can be shared but it won't necessarily be accepted. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.

At the same time, I believe the teacher does want us to walk away with some degree of frustration. It is right for us to feel frustrated that this is the way things currently are.

[18 : 03] It is right to lament when we see fools in power. It is right for us to feel that this is not the natural order of things, that this is not what we were made for.

You see, sometimes encountering foolishness can be very clarifying for us. It helps us not to buy into a wrong view of the world.

The fact is, many people today believe that human beings are naturally good and rational beings. Perhaps some of us in this hall today might even buy into that kind of thinking.

Now, that is partly true. We are made in God's image and so we are given an inherent dignity. Since creation's gone, we were crowned with glory and honour, made to resemble God by communicating his good character.

In that sense, we are naturally good and rational. But what many people forget to account for today is the presence and corruption of sin.

[19 : 25] We are not in paradise anymore. That is what the Christian faith teaches and what the teacher of Ecclesiastes refuses to let us lose sight of.

Because sin has invaded and corrupted us at every level, we find ourselves naturally listening to the wrong voices.

The voice of temptation, the voice of the flesh, the voice of the devil. That's why foolishness is so prevalent in our world.

Not because we don't have enough education, but because our hearts have declared independence from God. Now, praise God, he didn't leave us in this state of folly.

There's common grace. So in this world, wisdom still exists. And there's special grace. For into this world, Jesus came.

[20 : 31] But the world's full and complete redemption is not here yet. That lies in the future. That's why we still have a significant degree of frustration.

Wisdom should have the upper hand, but folly holds it instead. So here's the follow-up question.

Should we then give up? Is there any point to living wisely now if wisdom is forgotten and rejected and foolishness reigns?

Well, that's what Ecclesiastes chapter 10 is all about. Because here's what the teacher now wants to teach us. Though foolishness reigns, don't walk the way of the fool.

Don't walk the way of the fool. For wisdom is still much better than the alternative. Let me borrow an analogy from someone else that I found really helpful.

[21 : 37] Imagine a well-organized city. Perhaps think of a city like Melbourne with its neat grid-like system. If you have a map, it's pretty easy to navigate around the city, isn't it?

Even if you have never been before. But imagine now that a bomb has gone off. The city is now full of wreckage and rubble with streets being blocked and so on.

Now it is much harder to navigate even with a map. But the map can still come in useful, giving you pointers on which direction you should head in if you wanted to get somewhere.

Well, that's what it is like now. Sin is like that bomb that has gone off in our world. It has made everything messy. There is wreckage everywhere.

But there is still a semblance of an order. And wisdom is like that map that helps us navigate a messy and disordered world.

[22 : 43] It gives us the general geography so that we can know where to go even if it doesn't tell us every obstacle that is in the way or map out the future exhaustively.

And that is helpful because verse 2, which map you follow can take you down two very different directions.

The heart of the wise inclines to the right but the heart of the fool to the left. In Hebrew thought, the right side was the place of honour, of protection.

And so by implication, the left side was the place of dishonour, of disaster. We see this kind of framework, for example, in Matthew 25 verse 33 where we are told that Jesus will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

So wisdom will normally take you down a road to a good place whereas folly does the opposite. If you study hard for a test, that will usually get you to a better place than if you didn't study at all.

[24 : 03] If, as in verses 17 and 18, your king works hard and your rulers act responsibly, your country will generally be in better shape, be in a better place than if they were lazy and irresponsible.

And anyone who takes the road of folly, verse 3, will simply broadcast who he really is. A fool. So don't walk the way of the fool, the teacher says.

In other words, don't lack the proper fear of God and end up going the wrong direction in life. Remember, that is the biblical definition of a fool.

It has little to do with how low your IQ is or whether you have been to university or not. That is not the fool of the Bible.

Rather, you are a fool when you have completely lost touch with God and the design of his will. So be wise, the teacher says.

[25 : 19] That way, you can promote shalom. Now, so far in this series, I have taught you one Hebrew word. Hebel.

It means ephemeral and enigmatic. But let me teach you another, a more familiar one perhaps. Shalom. And in one sense, shalom is the opposite of hebel.

It means wholeness and flourishing. Shalom is the state in which the world was originally created to be. Genesis 1 is a world of shalom.

And when you are wise, the teacher says, when you live in line with God's design, you can actually be an agent of shalom.

You can push back a little against this present world's hebel nature while pointing to the shalom of our future world in Christ.

[26 : 21] How so? Well, the teacher gives us some examples. So here's the first way you can be an agent of shalom by the way you bring calm into conflict.

Verse 4, If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post. Calmness can lay great offenses to rest.

Back in chapter 8, the teacher told us not to act rashly if the king issues an unjust or foolish command. But what if the king gets angry?

Well, the way of wisdom is the same. Keep your cool. Be a peacemaker to use the language of James chapter 3.

For James 3 verse 17 on the screen, the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

[27 : 31] Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. In this world, there will always be conflict. But conflict in itself doesn't necessarily have to be bad if it ends with forgiveness and reconciliation with relationships restored.

That's shalom. And the wise are those who know how to work towards that end. here is a second way you can be an agent of shalom by the way you navigate potential snares.

Now, at first glance, it seems as if verses 8 and 9 when you read them are all about occupational health and safety. digging a pit, demolishing wars, quarrying stones, or carry some risks, the teacher seems to be suggesting.

Life can be unpredictable. So, verse 10, be wise and prepared. Sharpen your axe if it is blunt.

Now, that is probably true as far as it goes. But the immediate context suggests the teacher has something a little more in mind.

[28 : 57] In verses 4 to 7, he's just been talking about life in the royal court. And he still appears to be on the same subject in verses 8 to 11. He's just speaking more metaphorically.

And this seems to be what he's saying. It is a fact of life that the royal court has fools. They are scheming and plotting.

In the Bible, digging a pit is usually not an innocent activity, but full of sinister motives. Pits are traps, and evil people are the ones laying them.

So, the teacher is saying something similar to Jesus. be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Be prepared for hidden dangers.

At the same time, don't be like these fools. Because fools sometimes bite more than they can chew. They can get caught in their own snares.

[30 : 06] They fall into the pits that they dig. If they are snake charmers, their snakes might bite them first. So, instead, listen to Proverbs 27, verse 12.

The prudency danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. So, be like the former, not the latter.

take steps to avoid snares, whether physical or relational, without being the kind of person who sets them up.

That's true not just in the royal court, but in any area of life. Be aware you will deal with business people without integrity, without losing integrity yourself.

recognize that they are manipulative people without becoming one yourself. Be wise, don't be a fool.

[31 : 16] Here's a third way you can be an agent of shalom, by the way you tame your tongue. Fools speak without any substance, verse 13.

They just keep talking and talking unaware. They have no idea what they are talking about, verse 14. Soon, those words bite them back and eat them up, verse 12.

Writing to New Testament believers, James says a similar thing on the screen. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire, he says, and the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

That's the impact of foolish words. By contrast, the wise speak carefully because they have humility.

[32 : 26] The wise know when to say, I don't know. They know not to get into pointless arguments. And they know to be careful, 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.

Today, we might say this, don't be hasty to post anything on the internet, because once it is online, it is hard to take offline.

And if it goes viral, that's it. So keep choosing the way of the wise, the teacher encourages us.

Don't walk the way of the fool, God urges us. Unless foolishness it is the foolishness of the cross.

[33 : 30] You see, if foolishness reigns, why do we ultimately go the way of the wise? Isn't that ironically foolish?

No, it isn't, because it is the way of the cross. Think again of that poor wise man back in 9 verse 13 to 15.

And consider, do we not follow one who is a little like him? Consider Jesus. Those who learn of his background ask in disbelief, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Those who heard the claim he was the Messiah laugh in his face, fashion a crown of thorns, and mock him on the cross. Hail, King of the Jews.

Those who saw him die never believed that that is how he would begin his eternal reign. And those who remembered his teaching could never understand how could the first be the last?

- [34 : 37] How could those who humble themselves in service be the ones in glory? That is all foolish talk. Best to forget all of that.
- Let's look for another Messiah. And yet, God says, such foolishness in the eyes of the world is precisely the wisdom of God.
- It is a wisdom that might not win you any favour or even victories in this world. It is a wisdom that does not seem to gain the upper hand.
- Living God's way doesn't seem to gain you any advantage sometimes. It doesn't seem to gain you any friends. In fact, sometimes, it does the opposite.
- And given that Jesus said to follow him involves denying yourselves and taking up your cross, well, it sounds like madness to do that, doesn't it?
- [35 : 42] why would you want to? Isn't that foolish? No. Because Jesus says, in the bigger picture, it is actually the wisest thing you can do.
- On the screen, for whoever wants to save their life will lose it. but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.
- What good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet for feed their soul? And if that is true, the teacher says, you can take risks for God.
- You can take risks for Jesus. That is the basic point of 11 verses 1 to 6. The teacher knows there is risk in every area of life.
- In verse 2, you do not know when disaster might come or what disaster may come. In verse 6, you do not know if your farming ventures will succeed.
- [36 : 52] There is always risk in life. There is risk when you seek to correct a friend who is doing wrong. There is risk in being sacrificially generous with your money.
- There is risk in giving your time to that seemingly unappreciative person. There is risk even in simply becoming a Christian. You cannot avoid risk.
- So yes, you shouldn't be reckless. You should be wise in managing that risk. In verse 2, you should diversify and not put all your aches in one basket.
- Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight. In verse 6, you should work hard and not be idle. That's the wise thing to do. But his big point is don't let risk hold you back.
- You've got to take risk. If you want to live for the Lord, you've just got to go for it. You want to give, just give. You know honestly you have no excuse left not to come to the physical church gathering.
- [38 : 04] Just come. You've been thinking about sharing Jesus with your non-Christian family. Well, do it the next time opportunity knocks. Sometimes playing it safe is the foolish thing to do.
- After all, there are so many things you cannot control. If a tree falls down here and there, verse 3, there's nothing you can do to control that.
- So why wait hoping to control something you can never control? That is foolish. And if you wait and wait until the stars all perfectly align, there is something foolish in that too.
- That is the point of verse 4. Whoever watches the wind will not plant, whoever looks at the cloud will not reap.
- In other words, the farmer who is stuck in research mode forever will never end up farming and enjoying the fruits of his labour.
- [39 : 15] So, if you are always thinking, I just need a little bit more information before I decide, I just need to wait until the conditions become a little more perfect, you will never act or reap the potential rewards of your action.

After all, verse 5, we can never get to a point where we understand perfectly everything God does. And if we wait until we do, we are foolishly wasting the opportunity to redeem the time.

For we have already gotten to a point where we know we can trust Jesus' words. We have his cross.

We have his resurrection. What further proof do we need? 159. And if you trust what Jesus says, that losing your life for him is ultimately worth it, then you will act accordingly.

You will take risks for him, even if it looks at first glance like losing your soul. You will still put into practice Titus 2 from your quiet times, even if your non-Christian friends don't respond positively.

[40 : 44] You will exercise godly control over your tongue, even if the world says, boast, or get angry, or justify yourselves. You will value wisdom when you see it and promote it, even if it doesn't always pay off.

So yes, get frustrated that folly holds the upper hand for the moment. But don't let that put you off being wise.

More specifically, don't let that put you off taking risks for the Lord. Because there is a guaranteed return on your investment.

The crown of righteousness that awaits all those who have fought the good fight finished the race and kept the faith. And isn't that the wisest investment you can ever make?

Let us pray now for us to do precisely that. Father, as we live in this world, we get frustrated sometimes.

[41 : 58] We look at our politicians, we look at our leaders, we look around us, we look inside ourselves, and we know that there is foolishness.

But Father, we just pray, Lord, that despite the foolishness we see around us and more significantly inside of us, help us to run to you knowing that you offer us mercy and grace.

Thank you that the Lord Jesus is indeed the very wisdom of God in whom we can rely on. And help us to follow him, to let him lead us all the way home as we take up our cross, deny ourselves, and look forward to that crown of glory waiting for us at the end.

Help us to be wise and not be a fool. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.