

“Be Wise In Life”

6 March 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20

Sermon:

Last week you were able to see pictures of our two dogs, Winnie and Toby and the lesson of these family pets was that they are better off than a dead lion. The lesson being that when you are alive then life is to be lived. In fact, life is to be enjoyed as a great gift from God because when you are dead there is nothing you can do. Therefore, in view of the certainty of death, live life well, and in view of the uncertainties of life, live life well because the times and your times are in God’s hands. So, each day that you are alive say to yourself it is better than being dead and get on with living. Or as the Psalmist more eloquently says, *“This is the day that the Lord has made we will be glad and rejoice in it.”*

Today we are going to look at three animals mentioned in the passage and see what wisdom we can learn from the word pictures the Teacher uses to impart more wisdom to us in his quest for the meaning of life. They are

1. The fly in the perfume (9:13-10:4)
2. The snake in the wall (10:5-10:11)
3. The bird in the air (10:12-10:20)

Ultimately all teach us that we should be wise in life.

I. Flies in the perfume (9:13-10:4)

It is extremely easy to ruin your reputation and damage the standing you have in the world. That is the point the Teacher makes with his fly in the perfume illustration. It was not hard to find a few examples of this truth.

The Prince, who may have had a liaison with a young lady under age in the presence of a rich benefactor and who has now lost his titles, reputation, privileges and a lot of money.

The Premier league footballer who kicked his cat and had the misfortune of someone videoing the incident, who was fined, ridiculed and is constantly booed when he has the ball.

The Politician (s) who played golf in a pandemic and attended dinners and parties when the rest of the country was told to self-isolate and not attend indoor events.

The Teacher examines this idea of how a little folly can ruin the strength of wisdom. Each of those people mentioned above have also done many good things and still have different gifts and abilities, but their folly has ruined them. 10:1 *“as dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.”*

Let us look at his argument. He tells a story with contrasts, a small city with a few people up against a powerful King and huge siegeworks, yet in that terrible and unequal situation the

wisdom of a poor man saved the city. We are not told how, but tragically when the danger passed no-one remembered the poor man (9:15). The lesson the Teacher learns is that *"Wisdom is better than strength"* (v16) however such wisdom, the wisdom of the poor man, is vulnerable, why; because he was forgotten, and his wisdom was despised and no longer heeded. (v16) What I am beginning to appreciate, is how the Teacher accepts the reality of the injustice of this and other situations he has observed and from them seeks to learn lessons and draw conclusions for life, in his quest for meaning in a world that doesn't always make sense.

So (v17) quiet words of wisdom are better than the shouts of the foolish ruler but (v18) as the initial story revealed, wisdom is better than weapons of war, but it is vulnerable, that is one sinner destroys much good. The dead flies in the perfume can destroy the whole batch, a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. (10:1) We would say one rotten apple destroys the whole barrel. When you see the dead flies in the batch you know it will be ruined, when you find the rotten apple, you know those around will be affected and possibly the whole barrel. That is the point of v3 and the fool walking down the road. Foolishness can be seen, we say something like, *"you could see them coming a mile away"* it was obvious what was happening and was going to happen, stupidity is obvious. In the light of day, the Prince, the Premier league footballer, and the Politicians(s) are all very conscious of the wrongdoing and foolishness of their actions as are we who look on.

Why is foolishness so detrimental? (v2) Because wisdom and folly are opposites, one pulls to the right and the other left. Right is the way of wisdom, (by the way it has nothing to do with politics) right represents strength and the place of honour, as Jesus was raised to sit at the right hand of God the Father, as the sheep are placed on the right and sadly the goats on the left.

The Teacher's conclusion is that we remember the flies in the perfume and how easily they ruin everything. When you are faced by an angry person in any walk of life, who wages war, who shouts in your face, puts up a critical post on social media, or is negative about you in politics or any field of life, then stay calm and keep going, heed the quiet words of the wise because that calm response can help to dissipate the anger and avert the looming catastrophe.

II. The snake in the wall (10:5-11)

In this section he examines how easy it is to make a mistake, he has observed this in his life and the error can lead to catastrophic consequences. He begins with a ruler who places the wrong people in charge, and he then considers different work scenarios where a lack of care and thinking ahead can lead to serious consequences. So, folly or a lack of wisdom can undo everything that you have done. You can get bitten by the snake in the wall.

A foolish leader will appoint those who are not suitable to the task of leadership (v6-7) By such action the state can be turned upside down. We use words like nepotism, cronyism, the giving of jobs to family, associates and friends rather than those best qualified. Chernobyl has been on the news again, my understanding is that the nuclear disaster came about in 1986 because of poor reactor design and incompetent, poorly trained people in charge. We have had a serious scandal in our CAMHS in South West Kerry where a doctor inadequately trained and not adequately supervised was given too much leeway to make decisions that have ruined lives. We see in various governments around the world where those who do not have the abilities to rule are ruling and many suffer and those who should be ruling are

prevented from doing so, by power, loud voices, and corruption. Fools in charge (v6) fools that lack sense (v3) who could not even find their way home, (v15) putting fools in charge is a recipe for disaster that the Teacher has observed.

He has also noted the prevalence of accidents in the workplace that could have been prevented with some knowledge of the danger and better care. (v8-9)

- Hunter falls into his own pit (forgets where he dug it)
- Farmer bitten by a snake when moving or removing a wall.
- Stonemason injured by falling or moving stones
- The woodcutter injured by flying logs

Therefore, says the Teacher be wise and use wisdom when doing your job. (v10-11) Wisdom trumps strength as he has already said. So, sharpen you axe before use, and be careful that your snake is charmed before handling; use wisdom in your daily work, check the wall for snakes before you move the stone.

- Be careful who you appoint to leadership. Jesus fasted and prayed; he took time.
- Be careful about thinking through the consequences of what you do.
- Take advice, seek the wisdom of professionals, elders, mature people
- Be careful who you listen too (Remember Rehoboam - Solomon's son - who listened to unwise advise and wrecked the Kingdom)
- Remember wisdom is found in the scriptures. They are a light; they give us guidance.

III. The bird in the air (10:12-20)

The importance of our words is highlighted and considered by the Teacher. Note again the contrast between the words of grace from the wise and those of the fool in v12. When Luke reports how people heard Jesus' words, they said of him, *"all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips."* Luke 4:22

In contrast the words of the fool, go on and on, they do not know when to stop, wearying themselves and others. The teacher describes their folly, as madness and multiplication of words. Not only do they drone on and on, but they also speak of things they do not know and cannot know, that is the future. Though they speak about these things and have an opinion about everything they could not even find their way home (v.12-15). The Teacher is very disparaging about the words of the fool.

The Teacher then paints a picture of an up-side-down kingdom, and warns of the dangers of untrained leadership, (the servant) and incompetent leadership (princes feasting in the morning) leading the country. He then contrasts this by painting a picture of blessing for a country when leadership is trained and appropriate and they do their job well.

Again, he widens the picture from politics to life in general and highlights the danger of laziness which results in disaster because appropriate action is not taken when it should, in his picture of the house with the sagging and leaky roof because it was not attended too appropriately.

Leaders, he adds in v.19, who have an attitude of partying at the expense of the public purse, are a disaster. No-one cares, no-one does their job, the place is in chaos and their philosophy is to let the good times roll.

Each of these demand that we think very carefully about how we do our job and how we live our lives in this world; however, the point he highlights is a different, and I think surprising, one. When you live under such poor leadership the temptation would be to get caught up in criticism, to spend your time railing against the leadership and speaking against them. The wisdom of the teacher is DON'T! Do not think it and do not do it, because your words can get carried by a bird. In English we use the same expression, a little bird told me, meaning that I heard what you said. A little folly can get you into trouble, be wise in your use of words.

Look for ways to continue to do your job well even under poor leadership, avoid negative criticism as the way of response. What an incredible challenge that is? When you have a colleague who is poor at what they do, who is unhelpful and who makes life for you difficult, the Teachers advice is to avoid criticism in private or public. Instead get on with your job and who knows what time will bring.

Be careful what you post on social media. Do not put there anything personally negative about colleagues, work, family, government or church.

Be wise in politics and life, be wise in your daily work, be wise with your words.

Ephesians Ch 5:15-17 *"Be very careful then how you live-not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish but understand what the Lord's will is."*

Praise: Knowing You (All I Once Held Dear)

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: There Is A Higher Throne

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

Though much in life is beyond our control, the Teacher encourages us it is still beneficial to seek wisdom rather than settle for folly.

"A little folly outweighs wisdom and honour" (10:1). How have you seen the truth of this statement brought to life?

How does the message of the gospel frame this choice between wisdom and folly?

Consider a recent situation where you encountered conflict or pressure.

- In the moment, how did you react (attitude/manner)? What were the consequences?
- What did you say (or not say)? What were the consequences?
- What would it look like for you to react and speak with wisdom in a similar future situation?

Consider your "work" - the routine actions of your day or week. What does acting with wisdom look like in this area of your life?