

“The Fool’s Profile”

Ecclesiastes 10:12-20

I’m sure you’re familiar with the term ‘criminal profiling.’ It is an investigative strategy used by law enforcement agencies to identify likely suspects and has been used by investigators to link cases that may have been committed by the same perpetrator. In 1972, the FBI formed what it calls a “Behavioral Science Unit” to study serial predators. In the decades that have followed, ‘criminal profiling’ has become the subject of books, movies, and TV dramas such as ‘Criminal Minds’ and others. Profiling has a long history. In what is frequently cited as the first use of criminal profiling techniques, physicians in London used autopsy results and crime scene evidence in 1888 to make predictions about the notorious serial killer Jack the Ripper’s personality, behavior characteristics, and lifestyle.

Whether it is a criminal profile, or a student profile, or a business profile, a ‘profile’ is simply a set of data that portrays the significant features of something. It is a description of someone’s life, work, and character traits. Well, criminals aren't the only ones with a profile.

Here in Ecclesiastes 10, King Solomon provides us with the ‘profile’ of an infamous character in Scripture—the fool.

In this tenth chapter, Solomon contrasts wisdom and folly. His overall theme is this—since a little folly can undermine one’s life, we need wisdom and discretion even in the little things of life. Little things can have a big impact. He says in verse 1 that something as little as ‘dead flies’ can ruin an expensive perfume. His point is that even a little bit of folly can undo a person’s life. That’s why we need God’s wisdom in the little things of life—our words, our work, and our daily decisions. This seems to be a common thread that ties everything together in the chapter.

I read where someone figured out that since the beginning of humanity's accumulated knowledge all the way to 1845, if that represented one inch, the century from 1845 to 1945 would amount to three inches. So in a 100-year period you have a tripling of all information up to 1845. If you went from 1945, when it's three inches, to 1975, it would be the height of the Washington Monument—555 feet high. And from 1975 until now, it would be the height of a mountain.

Our acquisition of knowledge at the end of World War II jumped from doubling approximately every century to doubling every 25 years, and by 2010 it approached a J-curve of rapid ascent. On average, human knowledge is doubling every 13 months—a massive explosion of information. But in spite of all that collective information, it does nothing to overcome the dilemma of fools. It just gives them more ways to express their foolishness. In spite of all of this information, it does nothing to save man from his foolishness. He needs wisdom!

This section in Ecclesiastes continues the one that begins in 9:13. Solomon says twice that 'wisdom is better.' In other words, the wisdom of God is better than the folly of man, and he shows us how this is the case here in chapter 10. He shows us the difference in wisdom and folly by putting them side by side. The word 'folly' is used by Solomon nine times here in this chapter. It is a word that suggests a lack of good sense, lack of foresight, and failing to realize the consequences of a decision before it is made. Fools are known by their folly just as a tree is known by its fruit. And let me tell you, here in this chapter, we find what I am calling 'the fool's profile.'

1. The CONDITION of his heart (10:2)

"A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left."

It is important to note first that fools go astray because of their heart. The fool's heart is like a broken compass that leads him in the wrong direction.

“Heart”—*the core of a person’s being; the inside part of every person that either loves or does not love God*

It can be defined as the center of affection, the source of purpose, and the very soul of the spiritual life. The heart reveals who a person really is and what a person lives for. Everything in life flows from the heart. Those who are wise go in the right way because his heart leans the right way. The fool goes in the wrong direction because his heart is so inclined.

Psalm 14:1—**“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good.”**

The fool’s heart denies God. It is not for lack of evidence. Literally, the fool says, “No God for me!” The fool inwardly says that there is no God to whom he is accountable. He is blind to his sin and moral accountability. By convincing himself that there is no God, he then stifles his conscience and pursues the dictates of his sinful heart.

Proverbs 14:8-9—**“The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving. Fools mock at the guilt offering, but the upright enjoy acceptance.”**

Proverbs 10:23—**“Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding.”**

The fool mocks at sin, despises the provision of Christ for his sin, and makes a joke out of what God has said about sin. Proverbs 19 says that his foolishness subverts his way and his heart ‘rages’ against the Lord.

That is why nothing is more important in your life than the condition of your heart, for it determines the direction of your life. This is a constant emphasis throughout the Bible:

Proverbs 23:7—“For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”

Proverbs 4:23—“Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.”

Jeremiah 17:9—“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

Matthew 15:19—“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”

Fools head in the wrong outward direction because fools are led by the wrong inward devotion. And wherever our heart is, our feet will soon follow.

If you want to go in the right direction in life, the place to start is making sure that you're heart is in the right place. The wisdom of the gospel changes the heart of a person. God gives a new heart to those who trust Christ.

2. The CONVERSATION of his mouth (10:12-15)

“The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of the fool consume him. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness. A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him? The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.”

Once you understand the condition of a fool’s heart, you're then able to understand why his conversation in life is so foolish. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34 that it is ‘out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.’ You've heard it said, “Better to be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.” The Preacher says here that fools reveal themselves by their speech.

Unconstructive words (v. 12)

“The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of the fool consume him.”

Notice how the Preacher distinguishes between the words of a wise man versus the words of a fool. Just as their heart is in a different place, their words have a different kind of impact. The wise man’s words win him ‘favor.’ This may imply that someone who speaks with wisdom gains a good reputation.

“Favor”—*Hebrew word for ‘grace;’ refers to undeserved and unmerited favor*

For this reason, I like the way that the NASB translates this verse:

“Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious.”

The Preacher is saying that a wise person’s words show grace to other people. They are vehicles of truth and blessing. And so the point is not that wise words will get us something from others, but rather they enable us to give something to others. How have you shown grace lately in the way that you use your words?

In reality, this is the exact opposite way that most people use their words. Our words have the power to help us get what we want. We use them to get a laugh out of a person, to get attention from someone, or to manipulate someone into giving or doing what we want.

We can use our words to build people up or to tear people down. We can use our words to tell the truth or to spread a lie. Wisdom uses words constructively, but a fool’s words are unconstructive. Solomon says in verse 12, “The lips of a fool consume him.” Literally, it means that his words eat him up. A fool cannibalizes himself through the stupidity of his words. They’re self-destructive!

Think about how this is the case:

- a fool says something to get himself in trouble

- a fool says something that destroys a relationship
- a fool says something in haste without the truth

There are multiple ways for the fool's words to come back and bite him. One specific example is seen down in verse 20 where Solomon says, "Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter." I'm sure that you're familiar with the expression, "A little bird told me!" Well, it comes from this verse.

The point is that you need to be very careful in what you say because sooner or later what you say to one person will get repeated to another person with varying degrees of accuracy. (illus. of telephone game)

Unrestrained words (v. 13)

"The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness."

Notice that Solomon refers to the 'beginning' of his words, as if the very moment he opens his mouth, the fool is off to a bad start. He doesn't know when to show restraint. He talks just to hear the sound of his own voice. 'Foolishness' best describes what comes from his lips. He wants to be heard without listening to others. 'Evil madness' describes the effect that the fool's words have on those around him.

Proverbs 10:19—“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.”

The more you speak, the more opportunity and potential there is for you to sin. Wisdom, however, shows restraint.

Words are the vehicles of ideas, and they can be used to communicate in a positive way, or in a negative way. They can build up or tear down, caress or cut. In the New Testament, James says though it is but a small muscle, the tongue has tremendous potential to influence.

Curtis Vaughn—*“It can sway men to violence, or it can move them to the noblest actions. It can instruct the ignorant, encourage the dejected, comfort the sorrowing, and soothe the dying. Or it can crush the human spirit, destroy reputations, spread distrust and hate, and bring nations to the brink of war.”*

Proverbs 18:21—**“Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”**

Anonymous—*“Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can be only forgiven, not forgotten.”*

I heard a story about a certain woman who lived in a village that gossiped about another woman to such an extent that her reputation was destroyed. The woman later discovered that the things she had been saying were not true. She went to the village wise man to ask him about how to make things right. He told her to take a pillow of feathers and scatter them up and down the streets of the village and then come back and see him the next day. Though it seemed like strange advice, she did so. When she returned, he told her to go back through the streets and gather up all the feathers that she had scattered the day before. The woman protested, “I could never find all those feathers again, because the wind has blown them all over the place!” To which the wise man said, “Neither can you gather back all the words you said about your neighbor.” Wisdom shows restraint in words!

Uninformed words (v. 14-15)

“A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him? The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.”

The fool talks as if he has inside knowledge, when in reality he is clueless. He multiplies words, but he doesn't have all the facts. His words are without knowledge. He makes arrogant and boastful claims about what he knows and about what others should do, but he is unable to back up his words with the facts. He is opinionated and doesn't have the sense to keep his opinions to himself.

Plato—*“Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools speak because they have to say something.”*

Who knows all of the damage caused by unconstructive, unrestrained, and uninformed words foolishly spoken in haste! That's why the psalmist said, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

3. The CARELESSNESS of his actions (10:16-20)

“Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness! Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.”

The fool's heart is his main problem, and that contributes to his foolish words. The third thing to take into consideration about the fool is the carelessness of his

actions. Once again, he uses an illustration from government. Notice that he references a 'king' and those he surrounds himself with.

Notice the change in pronoun in verses 16-17. Solomon has referred to 'him' up until now, and now he says 'you.' He says, "Woe to you, O land." He's not referring to the reader as a fool. Rather, it's as if Solomon says, "You, reader, have something to learn here. This is a lesson for you so you won't be like the fool." When it comes to the careless actions of the fool, consider:

His immaturity (v. 16)

"Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!"

Solomon is describing a situation in which someone who is incompetent is the one in charge. In this case, he is king. But notice that there is something unusual about this king. He is described as being a 'child.' The word may indicate that he is young, much like King Joash was. That actually turned out to be a blessing for the nation because he had a godly influence in his life. (2 Kings 12)

The word 'child' isn't limited to a certain age. It could also refer to someone who is still immature. He is foolish and has never grown up to a place of maturity. The Preacher is saying, "Woe to you when you find yourself being governed by an immature fool!" His words would be prophetic when you consider how his own son, Rehoboam, will play the fool and divide the kingdom. (1 Kings 12)

Foolish, immature leaders are a sign of God's judgment:

Isaiah 3:1-4—“For behold, the Lord God of hosts is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and supply, all support of bread, and all support of water; the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the

prophet, the diviner and the elder...And I will make boys their princes, and infants shall rule over them.”

Age is no guarantee of maturity. One can be full of years and still be very foolish. Oswald Chambers said, “Spiritual maturity is not reached by the passing of the years, but by obedience to the will of God.”

His irresponsibility (v. 17)

“Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!”

In addition to immaturity, the fool is also characterized by irresponsibility. Rather than feasting at the proper time, the fool feasts in the morning and shirks his responsibilities. He thinks life is one big party. He indulges himself when he should be living and leading with sobriety. The foolish king that Solomon describes here did not use his authority for good of the nation, but for the good of himself. The fool’s number one concern is for himself, not for others.

Warren Wiersbe—*“Real leaders use their authority to build the nation, while mere officeholders use the nation to build their authority. They use public funds for their own selfish purposes, throwing parties and having a good time.”*

One of the contributing factors that led to the French Revolution was the perceived disconnect between the crown and the citizenry. It’s rumored that Marie-Antoinette, the queen of France during the bloody French Revolution, when she was told that the peasants had no bread, simply responded, “Then let them eat cake!”

His indifference (v. 18-19)

“Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.”

Because of his immaturity and irresponsible behavior, see the condition of things around him. Because of his careless ways, his roof is sinking in, his house is about to collapse, and yet he is indifferent to it all. His life is about to come to ruin and he is oblivious to it.

Matthew 7:24-27—“Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

If you go back up to verse 14, pay attention to the question that the Preacher asks: “Who can tell the fool what will be after him?” If he stays on his present course, who knows where he might end up? Who knows where his actions will eventually lead him?

I think about the foolishness of our leaders. Who knows where ‘folly in high places’ will take us as a country?

I think about the foolishness of parents. Much of the folly on display in our society today can be traced back to the epic breakdown of the home.

James Dobson—“*The most vulnerable victims of family instability are the children who are too young to understand what has happened to their parents. That tragic impact on the next generation was graphically illustrated to me in a recent conversation with a sixth-grade teacher in an upper middle-class California city. She was shocked to see the results of a creative writing task assigned to her students. They were asked to complete a sentence that began with the words ‘I wish.’ The teacher expected the boys and girls to express*

wishes for bicycles, dogs, and trips to Hawaii. Instead, twenty of the thirty children made reference in their responses to their own disintegrating families. A few of their actual sentences were as follows: 'I wish my parents wouldn't fight and I wish my dad would come back.' Or, 'I wish my mother didn't have a boyfriend.' Or, 'I wish I could get straight A's so my dad would love me.' Or, 'I wish I had one mom and dad so the kids wouldn't make fun of me.' Or, 'I wish I had an M-1 rifle so I could shoot those who make fun of me.'"

Who knows what follows a fool in his wake? Before we start pointing fingers at the obvious fools in our lives, we need to take a good, long look in the mirror. In the third chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul quotes from Psalm 14 and says that all of humanity has gone the way of the fool.

Romans 3:10-12—“There is none righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

The only hope for a fool is a wise and good King, one that laid down His life to rescue sinners from their folly. Happy are you, O land, when your King is the Son of Nobility. Blessed are you, O man, when your King is Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 53:4-6—“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

He was perfect in every way, even in the little things of life. There was not even a hint of foolishness in His life. And yet He went to the cross to die for my sins and has paid the full price for my salvation. Through faith in Him, foolish sinners are forgiven and truly made wise.

Horatius Bonar—*“A holy life is made up of a multitude of small things. It is the little things of the hour and not the great things of the age that fill up a life like that of the apostles Paul or John, David Brainerd, or Henry Martyn. Little words, not eloquent speeches or sermons; little deeds, not miracles or battles, or one great heroic effort or martyrdom, make up the true holy life.”*

Where I was once lost in sin, I've been given a new profile—saved, forgiven, adopted, declared righteous! Amen.