

Wisdom Guards Its Words

📖 Ecclesiastes 10:12-20

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If you'll return with me to Qohelet, the teacher, we will review the wisdom he taught last week and press on to his new teaching. This wisdom comes from his observations of life in a fallen world, life under the sun. We've been in chapter 10, so look once more at Ecclesiastes 10:2-7. This is a section where Qohelet teaches that gaining wisdom does not always mean gaining success. Now naturally you'd think that by gaining something so valuable it would result in success. But that's not always the case. Why? Because we live in world where man and nature are fallen, under the curse of sin, and therefore there are incongruities. It's not right, it's not normal, it's not the way God created the world, but it's the way it is because Adam sinned and we sinned in him. So God cursed the world. In verse 2 he is laying out a truth in this fallen world, a truth about the value of wisdom in a fallen, cursed world. "A wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man's heart directs him towards the left." This has been used sarcastically to support the conservative political bent, but the Hebrew says something different. "A wise man's heart is at his right hand," meaning, his mental disposition is his protection, whereas the foolish man's heart is at his left hand," meaning his mental disposition is his danger. There are two ways you can go here; you can stay a fool and live a very dangerous life or you can get wisdom and have protection. So I'd suggest you get wisdom. You need protection in a fallen fickle dangerous world. Verse 3 elaborates on why it's so stupid to remain a fool. "Even when the fool walks along the road," that is, as he goes about his every day activities, "his sense" or mental disposition "is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool." If you are a fool you can't hide that you are a fool. So you need wisdom and the way you get wisdom is through studying the Scriptures and asking God. You have to discipline yourself to do this. Now, in verse 4, even though wisdom is a protection, it doesn't guarantee success because again we live in a fallen world, and the fallen world is full of sinful people who are not equitable, they do not do what is right. I'm sure you've never experienced this. He uses an illustration from the workplace. Here's your boss, he's the ruler. "If the ruler's temper rises against you," so the boss is mad at you, what should you do? Yell back and show him he can't treat you like that, right? Storm out and quit, right? Wrong, that's the fool. Instead, "you should not abandon your position," you shouldn't quit your job. Why? "because composure allays great offenses." In other words, what will happen if you start defending yourself by yelling back at the boss and storm out quitting your job? You're going to offend him. Then next week when you go looking for a job and they need your resume and you give it to them, this

offense is going to come back to haunt you. So, instead, maintain your composure, have a relaxed mental attitude. That's the strong thing to do. That's the response that shows character. That's wisdom and wisdom will protect you, it's at your right hand. But even if you do this, Solomon saw in verse 5 that since we live in a fallen world, it's no guarantee you're going to get promoted and climb up the ladder. "There is an evil" or a better translation would be, "a misfortune." "There is a misfortune I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler--". Verse 6 is the misfortune, "folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places." In other words, foolish people get promoted to the high places in the organization and the rich, rich in wisdom, remain in humble places, at the bottom. Of course, it shouldn't be that way, but that's why it's a misfortune. It's a misfortune, not only for the people rich in wisdom who have to remain at the bottom of the totem pole, but it's a misfortune for the organization because they have a bunch of morons trying to run the show. This is an incongruity and it's because we live in a fallen world. Now verse 7 states the incongruity. It's as obvious as this; "I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land." It's not the way it should be, but things happen this way because people are fickle sinners. And so the point is that while wisdom is a protection, it does not always give you success. Sometimes fools get promoted and the wise remain at the bottom of the barrel.

Now that may discourage you from getting wisdom, but, in verses 8-11, Qohelot shows that getting wisdom is still valuable. However, as valuable as it is, it's only valuable when it is exercised and even then it has to be exercised at the right time. So, there are conditions for wisdom being employed in a way that it gives you an advantage. Verse 8, "He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success." The point is that you can have all the wisdom in the world, but if you don't exercise it in these daily activities, you are only putting yourself in danger. It's given to you as a protection, but if you don't use it you have no protection, you're naked. Of course, all four of these activities are inherently dangerous; digging a pit, breaking down an old wall, quarrying stone and splitting logs. So you use wisdom, which is skill in living, in order to remain safe. Again, it's a protection. And it gives you the advantage of success if you use it. But if you have it and don't exercise it, or you are a fool that rushes in, then you are going to get hurt. It's a dangerous world out there. So, wisdom is superior to folly, but it has to be exercised in order for you to milk the advantage out of it. In verse 11 Qohelot shows that there is also a right time to exercise wisdom and if you don't exercise it at the right time then again, you'll get hurt. "If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit to the charmer." You see that the charmer has wisdom, he has a skill, he can charm the serpent, but if he doesn't exercise it at the right time it's no advantage to him and he's bitten and dies. So, the principle in vv 8-11 is that wisdom is good to have, but it gives no advantage unless it is exercised, and even then it must be exercised at the right time.

Tonight, we come to 10:12-20 and here the lesson concerns the tongue. The tongue is a major topic in Scripture. There is a way to use the tongue and a way not to use it. It can both build up and it can destroy. It is a very

powerful instrument. Therefore, we need wisdom to be able to guide us in how we use the tongue. And if we are able to use the tongue wisely, it will give you an advantage in life. Andy Woods said, "Wisdom is characterized by...controlling speech (10:12-20) thereby avoiding many words (10:12-15) and foolishly criticizing profligate rulers (10:16-20)." Wisdom is trained to control the tongue. The tongue is the most difficult instrument in your whole body to control. What's strange about the tongue, James 3 says, is that it is very small but it's effects are very large. He compares it to the bit in a horse's mouth, which can direct the entire body of a 1,500 pound animal, and to the rudder of a ship, so small and yet it can direct the entire ship. That's what the tongue is like. It is a very small part of your body, but if you misuse it it can destroy your whole life. You need wisdom to control it. Let's get wisdom...

In 10:12 Qohelot says, **Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him.** The English translation is confused, but one thing here is correct. There is a wide contrast between the words from the mouth of the wise man and the mouth of a fool. The NASB says the **words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious.** However, this is not really the intent of the original Hebrew. It's true that the words of a wise man are gracious, it's just not the point here. The word **gracious** can also be translated "win favor." And that's the sense here. "Words from the mouth of a wise man win him favor." They win him favor with God and favor with men. Now, by contrast, **the lips of a fool consume him.** The Hebrew for **consume him** means "engulf him" in the sense of overtake him, like a wave slurping up a surfer. And so it comes to mean destruction. The translation should be, "but the words of a fool bring him to destruction." So how you speak is going to determine your reputation with God and men.

That's why it's so important for you to gain wisdom so that you can choose your words wisely. That's what gives you a good reputation with God and men. And if you are a fool and you are always spouting off you are going to destroy your life. All because you can't control that tiny thing in your mouth called the tongue. Now, we were taught the rhyme in elementary school, that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," but friend, that is a fool's paradise. Words hurt, they cut deep, they are the most profound weapon we can use against one another. How many relationships have you destroyed because of your words? Or how many have destroyed a relationship with you through their words. Words are sharp, they are a sword. It's no accident that the word of God itself is likened to a sword. When it's used of the word of God it's because it has convicting power. It pierces right to our hearts and we're convicted of our sin. But the words of men are also swords because they can tear people to pieces as we slash back and forth. The enigma of the tongue is that it can also be used to build others up. James uses this analogy too. He says, the tongue is the strangest of all you bodily organs; for with it we curse men and bless God. It's like a well that has both fresh and corrupt water. It's a mystery. It builds up, it tears down and the effects are dramatic in both directions. So we need wisdom to control the tongue, and it's not only what we say but it's how we say it. Think about the tone, the facial expression, the body language, all this is a part of our communication with one another, and it has to be governed by wisdom or you're going to hurt others, but you're going to hurt yourself worse because it is your reputation before God and

men. So it's a daily discipline. And the words from the mouth of a wise man are like honey, they gain him favor with God and men, but the words that drip from the lips of a fool are bitter, they destroy him in the eyes of God and men. Your entire life and reputation will be based on how you use the tongue, so take care to think before you speak.

In verses 13-15 he expands on the speech of the fool, and this is a further warning against being a fool and multiplying words. Solomon spoke earlier of not going on and on and on rambling, because the more you go on, the more liable you are to slip and say something destructive. Of the fool he says, **the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. Yet the fool multiplies words.** This is a tricolon, all three of these go together, so you can disregard the period between verse 13 and 14. A tricolon is a rhetorical device where three words or phrases are used in quick succession; he begins, he ends, yet he continues...The picture is of a fool giving a speech. How does the speech begin? With **folly**. How does it end? With **wicked madness**. In other words, it begins with stupidity and ends with insanity. It means everything he says just gets crazier and crazier. And **yet**, verse 14 is saying, yet he keeps on talking, even then he won't shut up. That's what it means he **multiplies words**. And I think you've all heard people like this that went on and on and the minute you thought they were done they kept going. These people think they are wise. They think they have to chime in and share their wisdom with you because they think they are an expert on everything. I can't wait for these people to say something theological, because I'm 100% certain they're about to hang themselves, and they do. But the subject could be anything, they are the expert and you need to hear what they have to say. In this context, they are evidently waxing stupidity about what will happen next, about the future, because the end of verse 14 says, **No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?** So the fool is going on and on about **what will happen**, things of the future, they think that they can tell you politically what is coming and socially what will happen next. And they pontificate about these things and yet, **who** is telling **him what will come after him?** God is the only one who knows the future. Men cannot tell the future. And God is not telling him these things and so he does not really know. Now this is many people, but think of the talking heads and the media. They report on events as viewed through their particular agenda, so it's all slanted, but they also predict the future, they're the modern day prophets, foretelling the future. But they are false prophets, they don't know what will come after. And I don't listen to them anymore than I listen to Benny Hinn. All they do is give people false senses of reality, all they do is get people upset and all they do is rile people up for no reason, because 99.9% of the time what they say will happen does not happen. So, I don't listen to them. To me it's a waste of time. These people are fools. The wise, who is seeking them out? Who is seeking out the teaching of the word of God? Who? You tell me. Those are the people of quality. Those are the people who have something to offer. Those are the people who one word a day is worth more than a million of these talking heads. The talking heads start off with folly and end with craziness and then they don't stop, they just keep on talking. You need to move on from that. You're wasting your time and your life. It's the word of God that is powerful. These people are going to hell.

In verse 15, **the toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city**, or “he doesn’t know his way to the city.” The **toil** of the fool is the toil of talking so much. He talks so much he **wears** himself out. The NASB rightly translates **fool** as a singular because the verb **wearies** and the pronoun **he** are singular, but the word **fool** is plural. So why is it plural? To communicate just how foolish this fool really is. It’s a plural of habitual character or intensity, meaning he is characterized by habitual foolishness or intense foolishness. Either will do. The guy is a fool in the fullest sense of the term. He talks so much, and that should be a warning sign, he talks, talks, talks so much that it is classified as **toil** and it wears him out. So much does it wear him out that he **does not even know how to get back to the city**. He’s delirious. Wiersbe said, “In Bible times, the roads to the cities were well-marked so that any traveler could find his way, but the fool is so busy talking about the future that he loses his way in the present. “He can’t find his way to the city” was probably an ancient proverb about stupidity, not unlike our “He’s so dumb, he couldn’t learn the route to run an elevator.”¹ The guy is stupid and so there is no reason to listen to him. Turn him off. That concludes the first lesson tonight about speech. What’s the lesson? The lesson is that the words of a wise man are few in number, but they are full of wisdom and thereby win him favor with God and men. By contrast the words of a fool are many and move from folly to craziness and then he keeps on talking. Therefore, get wisdom and use it in your speech.

In 10:16-20 Qohelot moves to discuss our speech relative to the ruler of a land. In verse 16, **Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning**. The pronouncement of **Woe** is a pronouncement of extreme pain. Extreme pain is pronounced upon a **land**. **Land** is metonymy for the people of the land (e.g. Matt 23:37). This extreme pain is for the people of the land that has for its **king...a lad and whose princes feast in the morning**. The word **lad** does not mean young when used of a king, but incompetent, naïve, inexperienced and immature. It is used in contrast with the king in verse 17 who is of noble birth. This **king**, then, was born a commoner and he was never trained for the office of king. And therefore, he does not know how to rule as a king. He does not know how to rule with the best interest of the nation. He thinks only of himself and the whole land suffers. Of course, in America we don’t have a **king**, or do we? But we do have a President, and the principle applies to the President and to all rulers in nations. What is the quality of the presidency in this nation over the last 70 years? Most, if not all, of our presidents for the last 75 years have been elected for some other reason than they would rule well. Most of them had little to no qualifications for the office. The reason they were elected is because they had good looks or charm or were popular or had a slogan that tugged on people’s heartstrings or offered them a government handout. The state of the people in this nation and its rulers is in pitiful state. We have a bunch of lads for president, lads who are incompetent to rule this nation. Whose **princes feast in the morning**, meaning they party all night and into the day. And they do it on public tax dollars. They are feeding themselves. The significance of this going on into the **morning** is that in the ancient world **morning** was the usual time for dispensing justice (Jer 21:12). But in a nation with an incompetent ruler there is no justice. Woe to the land whose king is incompetent and whose princes party all night into morning. They don’t know how to rule and the people suffer.

On the other hand, we see in verse 17, **Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness.** The **king** here **is of nobility**, meaning of noble birth and well-trained and prepared to ascend to the throne. As Wright said in the *Expositors Bible Commentary*, “The king here described is born to rule and has been trained for his task since his youth.”² He had been groomed for this position, trained in the laws of the land, trained in how to rule well for the beneficence of the populace. A great thing is that there are men in our country who fit these qualifications, a sad thing is they are usually not considered for President. They are not perfect, but they do understand the office and they do understand the constitution and they do understand how to rule well. Blessing is pronounced on the land that has a ruler who is trained from youth for that position. We should be training people for the office of presidency. It’s a position to be trained for. As for this king, his **princes eat at the appropriate time**, in other words, they eat at normal hours and they do so **for strength and not for drunkenness.** They are eating so they can be strong rulers, not misusing government funds to support drunkenness. Wiersbe said, “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.”³

In verse 18-19 Qoheleth elaborates on v 16, the king of incompetence and how the nation suffers. **Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks.** Hebrew parallelism; indolence and slackness are synonyms for laziness. Because the king didn’t have the upbringing to know how to maintain the kingdom his laziness effects the maintenance of the whole kingdom. The **rafters sag...the house leaks.** Basic maintenance was not attended to. Wiersbe said, “These foolish officers are so busy with enjoyment that they have no time for employment, and both the buildings and the organization start to fall apart.”⁴ It’s a truth that “Lazy rulers bring down the great house of the nation, as a lazy householder lets the beams of his house collapse so that the roof sags and lets in the rain.”⁵ We are seeing that in America over the last two generations. America is in decline. And the cause in our electoral system, is the people who choose men to serve as President that are not presidential quality.

Verse 19 is what is going on up there in Washington, **Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer for everything.** When the NASB says **men prepare a meal for enjoyment**, the Hebrew does not. The Hebrew simply says, “feasts are made for laughter” “for pleasure,” “for revelry.” The king and his rulers aren’t taking their rule of the nation seriously. They are busy planning big parties so they can laugh, have pleasure and revelry. This wouldn’t work very well without **wine**, so we are told **wine makes merry**, it lightens the seriousness of the task they are engaged in and helps them forget about the nation and their responsibility. And finally, **money is the answer to everything.** Or it could be translated, “but they think money is the answer to everything.” It really isn’t, and the teaching is not a positive one. It’s the thought of these poor rulers. They think that money is the answer to everything. Wright summarized, “Food and wine occupy the minds of lazy rulers, and they behave as though money can buy everything.”⁶ Woe to the nation who has such leaders.

But how does all this relate to being wise in your speech? Verse 20 is the key, **Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.** There is a way to speak with respect to our leaders. This is true even if the ruler is incompetent and lazy and his advisors are more of the same. We are not supposed to **curse** the king. It says, **in your bedchamber**, which is a way of saying in secret, in the most secret confidences, even before your own wife you are not to do this. It is not proper to **curse a king** of any quality. Why? Because as Romans 13 teaches, "There is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God." Therefore, do not curse them, **And in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man.** The **rich man** is the man who is **rich** in authority. He sits in a position of power. It is not a good idea to curse such a man. Why? **Because a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.** Word will get back to the king or the man rich in authority. They'll find out. This verse is very likely the source of the saying, "A little birdie told me." When you say things like this word travels quickly. Even when you think you are in safe company, there could be someone present who is in cahoots with a ruler, the boss or authority figure, or who wants to be, and will rat you out. So, in keeping with wisdom it is best to say nothing against them personally. Constable said, "In spite of such bad leadership Solomon urged restraint. If you complain, those in authority may eliminate you. Corrupt officials often have supporters in the most private places who take the names and words of complainers back to their masters."⁷ J Vernon McGee said, "Curse not the king." Regardless of our president's political party or his views, I do not feel that he should be caricatured or made an object of ridicule. In the New Testament Peter says, "... Honour the king." (1 Pet. 2:17).⁸ In the Greek Peter says, "Honour the emperor." So we know he was referring to the Roman Emperor. And if Peter was willing to command Christians to honor the Roman Emperor, then I think he would no doubt say that we need to honor the President. Paul agreed in Romans 13:7, "render to all what is due them...honor to whom honor." Simply because they hold the office we are to render them honor. That means not speaking ill of them or running them down. The Bible is consistent on this point; Thou shalt not speak evil of rulers. Yet it is almost a sacrosanct tradition in this country to curse the opposing political party. And while we may disagree with much of what they say and do, and though it may be a very difficult thing to not write and propagate e-mails or literature that runs down our rulers, especially when they are destroying the country or at odds with our political persuasion, yet the Christian must restrain himself from such dishonor. And to dishonor them is to really bring dishonor on ourselves. It is not Christian and it destroys the Christian witness and it promotes lawlessness and rebellion. Wright gave this sound advice, "If there is something wrong in your town or in the place where you work, you must either keep totally silent or be prepared for your proper criticisms to come to the ears of those at the top."⁹ That means being ready to deal with the consequences. So if you're not willing to have that confrontation, you should keep your mouth shut. It doesn't mean you can't promote your ideas and your candidate, it just means you shouldn't malign the opposition.

In conclusion, vv 12-20 explain how wisdom should guide our speech. In vv 12-15 the wise man chooses his words carefully and limits them, so as to gain favor, while the fool begins speaking foolishness and winds up in a mad rant. And still then he doesn't stop. In vv 16-20 there are two kinds of administrations described; one incompetent and lazy, the other competent and alert. Though people across the world face both kinds of administrations, the wise man will not curse the administration. He will keep his mouth shut. This does not mean he will not make his opinions known about what decisions should be made, it simply means he shouldn't speak dishonorably about the administration.

"This completes Solomon's review of his fourth argument that life is not worth living, 'the certainty of death' (2:12–23). He has concluded that life is indeed worth living, even though death is unavoidable (9:1–10) and life is unpredictable (9:11–18). What we must do is avoid folly (ch. 10) and live by the wisdom of God."¹⁰

"This also concludes the second part of his discourse. He has reviewed the four arguments presented in chapters 1 and 2, and has decided that life was really worth living after all. The best thing we can do is to trust God, do our work, accept what God sends us, and enjoy each day of our lives to the glory of God (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10). All that remains for the Preacher is to conclude his discourse with a practical application, and this he does in chapters 11 and 12. He will bring together all the various strands of truth that he has woven into his sermon, and he will show us what God expects us to do if we are to be satisfied."¹¹

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 120.

² J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1187.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 121.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 121.

⁵ J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1187.

⁶ J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1187.

⁷ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 10:20.

⁸ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Poetry (Ecclesiastes/Song of Solomon)*, electronic ed., vol. 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 82.

⁹ J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1188.

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 123.

¹¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 123.