

The Book of Ecclesiastes, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: The Wisdom of Words and Work

Ecclesiastes 10:1–11:6

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Help the class see that wisdom is intensely practical, governing how we speak and how we work, and that small foolishness in either area can spoil a life of otherwise good reputation (10:1).

Anchor Solomon's teaching on the tongue in the fuller New Testament instruction (James 3; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6), so students leave resolved to let their words be gracious, controlled, and few rather than self-consuming.

Lead the class to embrace generous, diligent, faith-filled labor (11:1–6) that sows widely and leaves the harvest to God, guarding against turning these proverbs into mere business advice and instead hearing them as a call to trust the God who makes everything (2 Corinthians 9:6–8).

Question 1

Student Question:

Solomon writes that "dead flies make the perfumer's ointment stink" and that "a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor" (10:1). According to the text, what does this proverb teach about how small foolishness affects a life or reputation, and how does this fit the larger biblical truth that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Ecclesiastes 10 turns from the broad reflections of earlier chapters to a string of practical proverbs, much in the manner of the Book of Proverbs. Solomon opens with a vivid and slightly humorous image: a perfumer labors to produce a costly, fragrant ointment, but a few dead flies fall in and the whole jar turns foul. The point lands hard. It does not take much to ruin much. "So a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor" (10:1).

The arithmetic of the proverb is striking. A person may accumulate genuine wisdom and real honor over many years, yet a small portion of folly can tip the scales and overpower it all. Reputation is built slowly and lost quickly. One foolish word, one moral lapse, one careless habit can outweigh a lifetime of careful living in the eyes of others.

This is wisdom literature written under the Old Covenant, before Christ, yet its truth is timeless and confirmed throughout Scripture (Romans 15:4). Paul gives us the New Testament echo: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9; 1 Corinthians 5:6). Sin and folly are not contained; they spread and corrupt the whole.

For the believer this is a sober call to guard the small things. We tend to excuse little compromises as harmless, but Solomon warns that the little folly is precisely what spoils the fragrance of a godly life. Faithfulness in small matters is not optional; it is the safeguard of everything we have built.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A little folly can outweigh much wisdom and honor; small compromises do real and lasting damage (10:1).
- Reputation and character are built slowly but can be spoiled quickly by one act of foolishness.
- Galatians 5:9 and 1 Corinthians 5:6 confirm the principle: a little leaven leavens the whole lump.
- This is Old Covenant wisdom that remains profitable for instruction today (Romans 15:4).
- Personal accountability matters: each person guards or spoils his own life by the small choices he makes (Ezekiel 18:20).

Discussion Prompts

- What are some examples of “dead flies,” small foolish habits or words, that can spoil an otherwise good reputation?
- Why are we so prone to excuse the little compromises while condemning the big ones?
- How does treating small sins seriously actually protect the larger work of a faithful life?

Question 2

Student Question:

Where in your own life have you seen a “little folly” quietly undo something good you had built? What does Ecclesiastes 10:1 stir you to guard more carefully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the proverb inward. Solomon has told us that a little folly spoils much; now each of us must ask where that has happened in our own story. The aim is not shame but honesty, the kind of self-examination Scripture commends (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Most of us can name a moment when something good was undone by something small. A trusted relationship strained by one harsh word. A reputation dented by one careless choice. A ministry weakened by an unguarded habit. The flies are usually small; the damage rarely is.

The danger is that we keep tolerating the small folly because it feels manageable. We tell ourselves it is contained. Solomon insists it is not. The wise response is to identify the little foolishness and deal with it before it spreads.

Encourage the class to move from recognition to resolve. Naming the folly is only the start; the wisdom of Ecclesiastes always presses toward changed living under the fear of God (12:13).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-examination is a biblical discipline, not morbid introspection (2 Corinthians 13:5).
- Small foolishness often does damage out of all proportion to its size.
- We tend to tolerate the small folly precisely because it seems harmless.
- True wisdom moves from recognizing the fault to dealing with it.
- Repentance is personal and practical, not merely a feeling of regret (Acts 26:20).

Discussion Prompts

- Can you recall a time when a small folly undid something good in your life?
- What small habit or word are you currently treating as harmless that may not be?
- What is one concrete step you could take this week to deal with it?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 10:12–14, Solomon contrasts the gracious words of the wise with the fool whose “lips consume him,” whose talk is folly and “evil madness,” and who “multiplies words.” What does this passage teach about the power and danger of the tongue, and how does it connect to New Testament teaching such as James 3:5–10, Ephesians 4:29, and Colossians 4:6?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Solomon now sets the wise tongue and the foolish tongue side by side. “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool consume him” (10:12). The wise person’s words win favor and do good; the fool’s words devour the very man who speaks them. His talk begins as folly and ends as “evil madness” (10:13).

Notice especially that the fool “multiplies words” (10:14). He does not know when to stop. He speaks confidently about a future he cannot know, piling sentence upon sentence. The wise know that restraint is part of wisdom; “when words are many, transgression is not lacking” (Proverbs 10:19).

The New Testament takes up this theme and intensifies it. James devotes a whole chapter to the tongue, calling it a fire, a restless evil, set among our members to defile the whole body (James 3:5–10). No man can tame it on his own. Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing, and James says this ought not to be.

Paul gives the positive command: “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29). And

again, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). The Christian’s words are to build up, not consume.

This is one of the central applications of the lesson. Our words reveal and shape our character. The wise person speaks graciously and sparingly; the fool talks himself into ruin. Under the lordship of Christ, the tongue is to be brought into glad submission.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wise speak graciously and to good effect; the fool’s own lips consume him (10:12).
- Multiplying words is a mark of folly; restraint belongs to wisdom (10:14; Proverbs 10:19).
- James 3:5–10 warns that the tongue is a fire no man can tame apart from God.
- Ephesians 4:29 commands speech that edifies and imparts grace, not corruption.
- Colossians 4:6 calls for speech that is gracious and seasoned with salt.
- Our words both reveal and shape character; speech is a spiritual matter, not a trivial one (Matthew 12:36–37).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between words that are “gracious” and words that “consume” the speaker?
- Why does Scripture treat the multiplying of words as a danger rather than a virtue?
- How does bringing the tongue under Christ’s lordship change the way we speak at home and at work?

Question 4

Student Question:

Examine your own speech this past week. Were your words more often gracious and seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6), or did you find yourself multiplying words and talking past wisdom? What needs to change?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks each student to hold a mirror up to his own speech. Solomon’s contrast is not theoretical; it describes the way we actually talk. The honest question is which mouth we recognize in ourselves this week, the gracious or the consuming.

Many of us discover that our words run ahead of our wisdom. We multiply words to fill silence, to win arguments, to vent frustration. We speak about things we do not understand and commit ourselves to outcomes we cannot guarantee. The fool of Ecclesiastes 10:14 is closer to home than we like to admit.

The remedy is not merely speaking less, though that often helps, but speaking under grace. Colossians 4:6 sets the standard: speech that is gracious and seasoned with salt, fitted to each hearer. That requires intention and the steady work of the Spirit shaping us.

Lead the class toward a specific resolve. Vague intentions to “watch my words” rarely change anything. Concrete commitments, such as guarding speech in a particular relationship or situation, are where transformation begins.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-examination of speech is concrete and practical, not abstract.
- We often multiply words to fill silence, win arguments, or vent.
- The goal is gracious speech, not merely fewer words (Colossians 4:6).
- Real change comes through specific resolve, not vague intention.
- The Spirit works to conform our speech to Christ over time (Galatians 5:22–23).

Discussion Prompts

- When are you most tempted to multiply words rather than speak with restraint?
- Is there a particular relationship where your speech needs to become more gracious?
- What is one specific commitment you can make about your words this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Solomon counsels composure: “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place” (10:4), and he warns of fools set in high places while princes walk like servants (10:5–7). What do these verses teach about wisdom under authority and in the face of injustice or disorder, and how does it square with passages like Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Solomon turns to the wise handling of authority and disorder. “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest” (10:4). The wise person does not react in panic or flee his post; he responds with composure, and that steadiness defuses conflict.

He then describes a world out of joint: “there is an evil I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: folly is set in many high places” while the worthy are brought low (10:5–7). Servants ride on horses and princes walk on foot. The wise observer recognizes that life under the sun is often unjust and disordered, yet he does not abandon wisdom because of it.

The New Testament teaches believers how to live under authority, even imperfect authority. “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1), for they are appointed

by God. Peter likewise commands submission “for the Lord’s sake” to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13–17). This is not approval of every ruler’s conduct but trust in God’s ordering of human society.

Calmness under provocation is itself a fruit of wisdom and of the Spirit. Where the fool flares up and the anxious flee, the wise person stays his ground and lets his steadiness speak. “A soft answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). Christ Himself, when reviled, did not revile in return (1 Peter 2:23).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Calmness under a ruler’s anger can lay great offenses to rest (10:4).
- Life under the sun is often disordered and unjust, with folly in high places (10:5–7).
- Wisdom does not abandon its post in panic but responds with steadiness.
- Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17 call believers to submit to governing authority for the Lord’s sake.
- Submission to authority is not approval of every act but trust in God’s ordering.
- Christ models composure under provocation; He did not revile when reviled (1 Peter 2:23).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean practically to “not leave your place” when a leader’s anger rises against you (10:4)?
- How do we hold together submission to authority with the reality that authority is often flawed (10:5–7)?
- Where do you see the wisdom of calmness defusing conflict in everyday relationships?

Question 6

Student Question:

When you face an unfair situation or a leader’s anger, what is your usual reaction? How might “calmness” that “lays great offenses to rest” (10:4) reshape your response?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves the teaching about composure from principle to practice. Every student faces moments of unfair treatment, a leader’s displeasure, or a situation that feels out of joint. The question is how we actually respond when the heat rises.

Our default reactions reveal our hearts. Some flare up in anger, some flee the situation, some nurse resentment in silence. Solomon’s wisdom and the example of Christ point a different way: a calmness that does not abandon its place and does not return evil for evil.

This calmness is not weakness or passivity; it is strength under control. It often accomplishes what argument and anger cannot. "By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone" (Proverbs 25:15).

Encourage students to picture a specific situation, perhaps a difficult supervisor, a tense family dynamic, or a frustrating injustice, and to consider how a settled, Christ-shaped calmness would change their response.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our instinctive reactions to anger and injustice reveal the state of our hearts.
- Calmness is strength under control, not passivity or weakness.
- Composure can accomplish what anger and argument cannot (Proverbs 25:15).
- Christ's example shapes the believer's response to provocation (1 Peter 2:23).
- Specific situations call for specific, prayerful resolve.

Discussion Prompts

- What is your usual first reaction when a leader's anger or an injustice comes against you?
- What would change if you responded with the calmness Ecclesiastes 10:4 commends?
- Is there a current situation where God is calling you to settled composure rather than reaction?

Question 7

Student Question:

Through a string of proverbs Solomon shows that work has consequences and that skill matters: he who digs a pit may fall in it, a dull ax demands more strength "but wisdom helps one to succeed," and the snake bites if it is not charmed first (10:8–11). What do these verses teach about diligence, foresight, and the value of wisdom in our labor?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Solomon strings together a set of work proverbs that teach foresight, diligence, and skill. "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall" (10:8). Labor carries risk, and the careless or scheming worker may be caught by his own undertaking. The proverbs warn us to work thoughtfully and to count the cost.

The center of the cluster is verse 10: "If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success." The dull-ax worker pushes harder and accomplishes less. The wise worker stops to sharpen the blade. Effort alone is not enough; wisdom directs effort so that it succeeds.

Verse 11 adds the snake that bites before it is charmed, a picture of opportunity and timing lost through delay or neglect. Skill applied too late is no skill at all. Wisdom acts at the right moment.

Taken together these proverbs honor diligent, skillful, foresighted labor. Scripture consistently commends the diligent and warns the careless and the sluggard (Proverbs 6:6–11; 22:29). The believer is to work “heartily, as to the Lord” (Colossians 3:23), bringing wisdom and skill to the task God has given.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Work carries real consequences; the careless may be caught by their own labor (10:8–9).
- A dull ax demands more strength, but wisdom brings success (10:10).
- Skill and timing matter; opportunity neglected is opportunity lost (10:11).
- Scripture commends the diligent and warns the sluggard (Proverbs 6:6–11; 22:29).
- Believers are to work heartily as for the Lord, with wisdom and skill (Colossians 3:23).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the dull-ax proverb teach about working wiser rather than merely harder (10:10)?
- How do foresight and timing factor into doing our work well (10:8–11)?
- In what ways can we offer our daily labor to the Lord rather than treating work as merely secular?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where in your work or daily responsibilities have you been swinging a “dull ax” (10:10), pushing harder instead of working wiser? What is one skill, habit, or preparation God may be calling you to sharpen?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the dull-ax proverb to the student’s own labor. Most of us, at some point, find ourselves pushing harder at a task instead of stopping to work smarter. We mistake busyness for effectiveness and exhaustion for faithfulness.

Solomon’s counsel is to sharpen the blade. That may mean learning a new skill, building a better habit, seeking counsel, organizing the work, or simply pausing long enough to plan. Wisdom invests in preparation so that the work itself succeeds.

This is not an excuse for laziness; the diligent still swing the ax. But diligence joined to wisdom accomplishes far more than raw effort alone. God is honored when we steward our work thoughtfully.

Press the class toward one concrete area. Where are they swinging a dull ax right now, and what would sharpening it look like this week?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We often confuse working harder with working wisely.
- Sharpening the ax may mean new skills, better habits, counsel, or planning.
- Wisdom invests in preparation so the work succeeds (10:10).
- This honors diligence; it does not excuse laziness.
- Stewarding our work thoughtfully honors God (Colossians 3:23).

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your work or responsibilities are you pushing harder instead of working wiser?
- What would “sharpening the ax” look like in that specific area?
- What habit, skill, or preparation might God be calling you to develop?

Question 9

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 11:1–6 Solomon urges, “Cast your bread upon the waters,” give portions to seven or eight, and sow seed morning and evening, “for you do not know which will prosper,” because “you do not know the work of God who makes everything” (11:5). What does this passage teach about generous, diligent, faith-filled labor that trusts God with outcomes we cannot control, and how do New Testament passages such as 2 Corinthians 9:6–8 and Galatians 6:7–9 deepen and complete this Old Testament wisdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson. In chapter eleven Solomon shifts to the wisdom of generous, diligent, faith-filled labor. “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth” (11:1–2). The picture is of bold, generous investment and wide diversification, scattering our resources and efforts broadly because we cannot foresee what will succeed.

He grounds this in the limits of human knowledge. “As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything” (11:5). We are not the authors of the harvest. God makes everything, and His ways are past finding out. Therefore we sow in faith. “In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not withhold your hand, for you do not know which will prosper” (11:6).

It is important not to flatten these proverbs into mere business advice or a strategy for personal gain. Solomon is teaching a posture of trust: work generously and diligently, scatter widely, and leave the outcome with the God you cannot see or predict. The wise person is freed from paralysis by faith in God’s providence.

The New Testament gathers up and completes this teaching. “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully... for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:6–8). And Paul warns and encourages: “Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap... let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Galatians 6:7–9). The Christian sows generously in giving, in service, in good works, and entrusts the harvest to God.

Here is the heart of it. We cannot control or foresee outcomes, so we are tempted to hoard, to hesitate, to wait for perfect conditions that never arrive. Solomon and Paul together call us to a better way: sow generously, work diligently, give cheerfully, and trust the God who makes everything to bring the increase in His time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Generous, bold investment of our resources and effort is commended (11:1–2).
- We sow in faith because we cannot foresee or control outcomes (11:6).
- God makes everything; His works are beyond our knowing, so we trust His providence (11:5).
- These proverbs are not mere business advice but a call to faith-filled, generous labor.
- 2 Corinthians 9:6–8 promises that bountiful, cheerful sowing reaps bountifully under God’s blessing.
- Galatians 6:7–9 assures that we will reap in due season if we do not lose heart.
- Faith in God’s providence frees us from the paralysis of fear and hoarding.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to “cast your bread upon the waters” and sow morning and evening (11:1, 6)?
- How does not knowing “the work of God who makes everything” (11:5) actually encourage rather than discourage diligent labor?
- How do 2 Corinthians 9:6–8 and Galatians 6:7–9 deepen and complete this Old Testament call to generous sowing?

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific area where God is calling you to “sow generously” and trust Him with a harvest you cannot see or control (11:6). How is Jesus forming you to give, work, and speak in faith rather than from fear of the unknown?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks each student to name a specific area of faith-filled sowing. The whole passage has been pressing toward this: generous words, diligent work, bold giving, all offered in trust to the God who controls the harvest we cannot see.

Fear is the great enemy of generous sowing. We hold back our resources, our words of encouragement, our service, and our witness because we cannot guarantee the result. Solomon's counsel and Paul's promise free us to sow anyway, trusting God with the increase (11:6; 2 Corinthians 9:8).

This is where Christ's forming work becomes visible. He is shaping His people into cheerful givers, diligent workers, and gracious speakers who labor not from anxiety but from faith. The fruit of His Spirit is patience, generosity, and faithfulness, the very qualities this passage commends.

Lead the class to name something concrete: a relationship to invest in, a gift to give, a good work to begin, a word of grace to speak, even when the outcome is uncertain. That is sowing in faith, and that is Christ at work in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fear and the desire for guaranteed outcomes hold us back from generous sowing.
- Faith frees us to sow even when results are uncertain (11:6).
- God supplies and multiplies what we offer cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:8).
- Christ forms His people into generous, diligent, gracious servants.
- Sowing in faith means concrete action, not vague good intentions.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one area where God is calling you to sow generously and trust Him with the harvest?
- What fear or desire for control most tempts you to hold back?
- How is Jesus forming you to give, work, and speak in faith rather than from fear?