

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Lesson 8: The Wisdom of Words and Work -- Ecclesiastes 10:1–11:6

Picture a craftsman who has spent days mixing a precious ointment, blending costly spices until the whole room smells like a garden after rain. Then a few dead flies fall in, and the whole batch turns rancid. One ruined jar. A handful of careless flies. That is the picture Solomon hands us as this lesson opens: “Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment stink.” A little folly, he says, outweighs wisdom and honor. We know the truth of it. We have watched a good reputation curdle over one foolish sentence, one careless evening, one small compromise nobody thought would matter.

From there the Preacher walks us through a gallery of word pictures, each one a snapshot of ordinary life. A man digs a pit and falls into it. Another quarries stone and gets bruised. A woodsman swings a dull ax and has to work twice as hard because he never stopped to sharpen the blade. A snake bites the charmer before a single note is played. These are not abstractions. They are kitchen tables and job sites and front porches, the places where wisdom either shows up or fails to show up. Solomon wants us to see that how we speak and how we work are not small matters. They are where character lives.

Listen closely and you will hear two themes braided together through these verses. One is the tongue. “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious,” he says, “but the lips of a fool consume him” (10:12). The fool keeps talking, multiplying words, not knowing when to stop, until his own mouth swallows him whole. The other theme is work, and it carries us into chapter eleven with one of the most generous images in all of Scripture: “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days” (11:1). Sow widely. Give freely. Plant in the morning and again in the evening, because you do not know which seed will take root.

Here is where it gets personal. You and I cannot see the future. We do not know the work of God who makes everything (11:5). We cannot guarantee that the kind word will land, that the diligent labor will pay off, that the seed we scatter today will green up tomorrow. And that uncertainty tempts us to play it safe, to hoard, to wait for perfect conditions that never come. Solomon’s counsel cuts against all of that. Watch your words. Sharpen your ax. Sow generously. Then leave the harvest with the God who holds it. This week, that truth has to climb down out of the page and into your conversations, your work, your giving.

Group Discussion: Solomon ties wisdom to both our speech and our work in this passage. As a group, talk through this: where do you see the most damage done in everyday life by careless words versus careless work, and how does godly wisdom protect us in each area?

Personal Reflection: Think honestly about your own “dead flies” (10:1), the small foolish habits that can spoil a life of otherwise good reputation. What is one little compromise in your speech,

work, or character that you have been treating as harmless, and what would it look like to deal with it this week?

Read Ecclesiastes 10:1–11:6

Study Questions

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: James 3:5–10, the tongue is a fire that no man can tame apart from God; Ephesians 4:29, let no corrupt word proceed but only what builds up; 2 Corinthians 9:6–8, whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully and God loves a cheerful giver; Galatians 6:7–9, a man reaps what he sows, so let us not grow weary in doing good; Romans 13:1–7, be subject to governing authorities as established by God

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