

Ecclesiastes 10:12–20 | “The Folly of Folly”
Preached on September 20, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to Ecclesiastes 10, and we will be in verses 12–20 this morning. *[pauseeee]*

We are at the tail end of our series in the book of Ecclesiastes, and what an interesting study it has been. *[pause]*

Most recently, the author has been showing us the prevalence of folly in the world, and today’s passage will once again highlight that. *[pauseeeee]*

There’s a saying which goes, “I’m not totally useless, I can be used as a bad example!” *[pause]*

Someone has to be the one to set the bad example, right?

I guess you could say that you could be a *good* bad example. *[pauseeee]*

The bad example teaches us what NOT to do, for it illustrates in vivid imagery what it looks like to do something wrong. *[pause]*

Its intent is to cause us to avoid making that decision. *[pauseeeee]*

Many times, bad examples embed themselves in our brains.

So let’s say that you’re at work and you see a co-worker do something wrong that gets them into trouble. *[pause]*

After seeing that bad example, what would you do?

You are going to make sure that you don’t do the same thing. *[pause]*

The bad example got ingrained into your mind and helped you to avoid doing wrong. *[pause]*

Well the author of Ecclesiastes uses some bad examples of folly in this passage to ingrain them in our minds, so that we would live wisely, instead. *[pauseee]*

Let’s READ the passage *[READ 12–20]*

In this text, Solomon talks about folly in different areas of life, and the first one is found in verses 12–15, which shows us...

I. Foolishness in speech and deeds. (12–15)

In 2010 was the worst oil spill in the history of the United States. *[pause]*

Called “The Deepwater Horizon oil spill,” it led to 134 million gallons of oil leaking into the Gulf of Mexico. *[pause]*

The company that got most of the blame was BP, and amidst the tragedy, BP's CEO, Tony Hayward, made some foolish comments. *[pause]*

In an interview, he mentioned that he wanted his life back,¹ which made many people upset, as he was acting like a victim, even though his company had caused a massive oil spill. *[pauseee]*

And secondly, he downplayed the seriousness of the spill by saying, "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean..."

The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume."² *[pauseee]*

Folly can definitely be seen in our speech, and that's what Solomon talks about here. *[pauseeee]*

He first shows us that a fool's words can hurt himself...

Verse 12 says, "The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him." *[pause]*

Think about the words of a wise person: they are usually kind, fitting, truthful, and helpful, and that's attractive to people.

They gain the favor of others because people can trust that they aren't going to say something foolish. *[pauseeee]*

Aren't there people that you know who you trust will say the wise, right thing? *[pause]*

They are people that we can count on, and they have a good reputation because of it. *[pauseeee]*

Now obviously, there are people who don't like those who follow the Lord because they are against God, but for the most part, wise speakers are favored by others. *[pause]*

The fool is the opposite of this...

The fool is a person who when he or she opens their mouth, you get nervous, because you're thinking, "What are they going to say *this time*?" *[pause]*

They aren't very pleasant to talk to because they have said many unkind, unfitting, untruthful, and unhelpful things. *[pause]*

Because of this, they do not have a very good reputation, and this is why Solomon says here literally in the original language, "the lips of a fool swallow him." *[pause]*

It's like a fool is eaten by their own mouth, and so it's a picture of hurting yourself by your own words. *[pauseeee]*

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/bp-ceo-tony-hayward-apologizes-for-saying-id-like-my-life-back-2010-6>.

² <https://www.newsweek.com/quote-day-tony-hayward-214328>.

When you consistently speak foolish things, you are actually hurting yourself. *[pausee]*

Many do not think this way, but it's true...

When you speak foolishly, over time, your reputation is tarnished, but also, your relationships are torn asunder. *[pause]*

Who wants to hang around or be close to someone who speaks foolish things all the time?
[pause]

Your character goes downhill fast when you speak foolish things, and what good can you do for others when you speak this way? *[pause]*

Your influence, impact, and even your job could be in the balance because of your words.
[pauseeee]

Have you hurt yourself with your foolish words?

Turn to wise words, knowing the blessing that they not only bring upon others, but upon yourself. *[pauseeee]*

The next thing that we see about a fool's words is that a fool's words are full of folly. *[pause]*

Verse 13 points out that the beginning of his words are foolishness, and the end is evil madness.
[pausee]

A fool doesn't start out talking with some wisdom, and merely end up saying something foolish.

Nor does a fool start out saying something foolish, but turn it around into wisdom.

No—from beginning to end, a fool's words are full of folly. *[pauseeee]*

This shows us that a foolish person is not someone who every now and then says something foolish by mistake. *[pause]*

Most of us have said some foolish things in our lives from time-to-time, but a fool's words are *filled* with folly from start to finish. *[pause]*

He may every now and then say something wise accidentally, but folly characterizes their speech. *[pauseeee]*

So a fool is displayed by the *content* of what they say, but verse 14 shows us also that a fool is displayed by the *quantity* of what they say. *[pause]*

“A fool multiplies words,” we are told here.

So a fool's mouth is continually running, though many wish they would shut it down. *[pauseeee]*

I wonder how much you hold back from speaking versus how much you just speak your mind.
[pause]

A fool needs a filter, but has none, and most people could use less words spoken, not more.
[pauseeee]

The majority of social media posts and comments could probably not be written, and the world would be better off for it. [pauseeee]

A wise person asks, “Should I really be saying this?” but a fool just says it with little to no hesitation. [pauseeeee]

Notice what else is said in verse 14: “A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?” [pause]

This means that a fool speaks a lot, even though he doesn’t know the answers to things. [pause]

No person knows what the future will behold, but the fool sure speaks like he does! [pause]

A fool is a confident, self-proclaimed “expert,” who doesn’t know what they’re talking about.
[pauseeeee]

These verses teach us that you can know a fool by their speech. [pause]

As you get to know people, and talk to them, you can usually discern how wise or foolish they are.

And this should cause each of us to reflect upon our own words: what do *my* words reveal about *me*? [pauseeee]

That’s the fool’s speech, but we also see something about the fool’s deeds in verse 15: “The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.” [pause]

Get this: the fool has a lot to say about things he doesn’t know about, but can’t even navigate to a city. [pause]

He sure can talk a lot, but he doesn’t work a lot, for even a little work wears him out. [pauseeee]

In that day, the city would be a well-known place because it’s not like there were tons of cities and roads.

Also, the city was where the marketplace was and other important things, yet here’s someone who doesn’t even know the way to the city. [pause]

So a fool can’t even do the most basic things of life because it ends up being too wearisome for them.

Their folly makes normal life harder for themselves than needs to be. [pauseeeee]

This is a sad picture of a person who can't function well in normal life.

They are like the modern-day “keyboard warriors” who have a lot to say on the internet, but they can't even hold a job down. *[pauseeee]*

The picture of a fool given here is not very pleasant.

It's showing us that folly is revealed in a person's life very clearly, for you will see it in a person's words and deeds. *[pausee]*

So what's revealed in *your* words and *your* deeds? *[pause]*

We need the Lord's help, or else we would all be fools!

Without God, our words would be full of folly, we would speak things that we don't know about all the time, and we wouldn't be able to even function in life. *[pause]*

Truly, we would consume ourselves without God's gracious intervention and merciful power in our lives. *[pauseeee]*

We saw foolishness in speech and deeds, but now we will see...

II. Foolishness in leaders. (16–17)

The great military commander named Napoleon made a lot of good decisions, but as a leader, he also made a tragically foolish one. *[pausee]*

Napoleon decided to invade Russia with 680,000 men, but with winter just around the corner. *[pause]*

Russia kept retreating back, and this led Napoleon to face a harsh winter with very little supplies. *[pause]*

Napoleon's foolish decision would decimate his army, for by the time he left Russia, he lost around 500,000 men. *[pause]*

It was also a turning point, for his army was not the same after this, and other nations took advantage, defeated him, and sent him into exile.³ *[pauseeee]*

Foolishness can be displayed in leaders, that's for sure.

But here's the thing: because they are leaders, their foolishness doesn't just affect them, but affects their people, too. *[pause]*

Napoleon's foolish decision affected his whole army, not just himself. *[pauseeee]*

³ <https://www.history.co.uk/article/what-was-the-worst-military-decision-in-history>

Look at verse 16: “Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!” *[pause]*

Solomon pronounces a woe upon a land, whose leaders are foolish because the land is negatively affected by it. *[pause]*

He points out how a king could be a child, and princes could feast in the morning, and this is most likely describing leaders who are childish and immature. *[pause]*

Instead of acting like a mature adult, a bad leader can act like a child, throwing tantrums over little things, making unwise choices, and seeking the wrong things. *[pauseeee]*

They can also be immature, for they are all about partying, *even* in the morning. *[pause]*

This shows a leader with a lack of restraint, a lack of soberness, and completely wrong priorities. *[pause]*

If they are like that, then they aren't going to make wise choices that benefit the nation. *[pauseeee]*

On the flip side, we see in verse 17 that a good leader is a blessing to the land...

It says, “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!” *[pause]*

A son of nobility would have been someone who was trained up to know how to conduct himself as a leader.

They would be prepared for this, and so would be more likely to handle it well. *[pause]*

This would benefit the land, for they would have a competent leader. *[pauseeee]*

Likewise, a land is blessed when its princes feast at the proper time.

They aren't feasting to get drunk and simply have a good time, but feasting to gain strength for their tasks. *[pause]*

Now that's a wise, good leader!

That shows someone with self-restraint, sober-mindedness, and with their priorities in the right place. *[pause]*

Someone like that will most certainly bless the nation they are leading because they are leading with wisdom. *[pauseeee]*

Near the end of the Revolutionary War, some of the American officers were frustrated that the army wasn't getting paid. *[pause]*

Unrest in the camp grew so much that they were about to threaten Congress that if they didn't get paid...

The army would disband, leaving the country unprotected, *or* even refuse to disband after the war, threatening a military takeover. *[pause]*

But George Washington stepped in the gap, making a speech to the officers, convincing them to trust that they would get paid.⁴ *[pause]*

His wisdom, composure, maturity, and priorities all played a part in blessing this nation of ours, for America could have gone a whole different direction, if he had let that unrest continue. *[pauseeee]*

A nation's leaders are vital to the health of the nation as a whole. *[pause]*

If a nation has wise leaders, it will be blessed, but if it has childish, immature leaders, then it will be hurt by that. *[pauseeee]*

This should cause us to be thankful when we have wise leaders, and look for wisdom as a quality, when choosing new leaders. *[pause]*

The most important qualities that we should look for shouldn't be mere charisma or confidence, nor mere popularity and ambition.

Rather, we should look for wisdom, self-control, and someone with the right priorities. *[pauseeee]*

These verses also challenge us, if we are a leader in any way, to use wisdom as we lead. *[pause]*

Maybe you are a parent, leader in the workplace, leader in the church, or leader somewhere else.

Use wisdom as you lead, knowing that how you lead affects those under you. *[pauseeee]*

This should cause each of us to seek God's wisdom, knowing that left to ourselves, we would be childish and immature, but with God's wisdom, we can be prepared, sober, and discerning. *[pause]*

So trust that the Lord has what you need to lead well, and let's pray for our leaders, too. *[pauseeee]*

Solomon gave us examples of foolishness in leaders, but now he gives us examples of...

III. Foolishness in individuals. (18–20)

We see this in verses 18–20, which shows us how we need wisdom for everyday life. *[pause]*

⁴https://history.army.mil/Portals/143/Images/Birthday/Army_History_and_Heritage.pdf?ver=d_5qOX_Y9F_nUUytJUdSqA%3D%3D&https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/newburgh-conspiracy

The first aspect that's brought out is how folly can be demonstrated in *laziness*. *[pause]*

Verse 18 says, "Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks." *[pause]*

Wisely working hard prevents many bigger issues from arising down the road, but when someone is lazy, they do not step up and do the work needed to keep things running well. *[pause]*

In a way, the lazy person's foolishness hurts themselves once again—now they have to deal with a roof that has major problems. *[pause]*

If only they would have worked hard, they would have had a functioning roof.

And this is because the lazy person looks for comfort today, but ends up regretting it tomorrow.

The hard worker looks to deal with issues today, so that they do not regret it tomorrow. *[pauseeee]*

Many people do not see laziness as foolishness, but it is. *[pause]*

When you are lazy, you hurt yourself and others because you aren't stepping up to do what needs to be done.

And eventually laziness catches up with a person, and leads to needless agony. *[pauseeee]*

Are you foolish because you are lazy? *[pause]*

Understand that foolishness isn't just seen in a person's words, but in a person's work, too. *[pauseeeee]*

Next is verse 19, which is a verse that is hard to interpret...

It says, "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything." *[pause]*

Now some take this as affirming that bread, wine, and money have their place in life, and that *could* be right, for Ecclesiastes has often highlighted the good, earthly gifts of God.

But others take this as a critique of how people view these things, and I would agree, for it fits the surrounding context of showing things to avoid. *[pause]*

So I believe that this verse is describing how some people *view* bread, wine, and money—they see the pleasures of this life as the goal of life. *[pauseee]*

Like the immature leaders spoken of earlier, they feast to party, not for strength.

They see the things in this life, not as gifts to be stewarded, but as tools to experience the utmost pleasure. *[pauseeee]*

This verse probably points to indulgence, as they see bread being *made* for laughter, and wine being made to gladden life.

So they use food and drink as a way to find joy, and they look to money as the answer to their problems. *[pauseeee]*

This may even link back to the bad leaders and slothful individuals, for instead of being wise and working hard, these people are all about the here-and-now, pleasures of life. *[pauseeee]*

This reminds us that you cannot live with the goal of pleasure as ultimate, for it is a foolish way to live.

It's a shallow and empty way of life. *[pause]*

If you make food, drink, and money your gods, then you'll find yourself on the path of folly, which does not satisfy. *[pause]*

You may experience some *temporary* happiness, but in the end, you will experience *lasting* regret. *[pauseeee]*

Folly can be displayed in individuals in their laziness, in their pursuit of pleasure, but lastly, in a lack of discernment when talking about leaders. *[pause]*

Verse 20 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." *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever heard the saying, "A little birdie told me"? Well that comes from this verse.

It reminds us that we need to be careful about what we say about others, especially our leaders. *[pause]*

I'm sure we have all said some things in private that were *meant* for private, but they ended up being shared with others. *[pause]*

You never truly know who is listening, so you must be very discerning in what you say about those in authority over you. *[pauseeee]*

If you said something very critical about your king back in the day, and it was found out, the consequences wouldn't be good at all.

So also, realize that what you say about others can come back to hurt you. *[pause]*

Use wisdom to know what and when and how to speak. *[pauseeee]*

Folly can be seen in our individual lives, and in so many areas of our lives, too. *[pause]*

Lord, we need wisdom! *[pauseeee]*

This passage is teaching us to...

See the folly of folly, and pursue wisdom!

This passage has definitely highlighted folly. *[pause]*

We have seen how it can show up in our words and deeds.

It can show up in our leaders, and we all groan because of it. *[pause]*

It can also show up in our individuals' lives, too. *[pauseeee]*

Now this spotlight on folly isn't given so that we would sit in judgment with our fingers pointed at everyone else, but it's meant to help us evaluate our own lives...

"In what ways am I acting foolishly?" *[pauseeee]*

A text like this is supposed to cause us to actually *do something* about our foolishness, so will you turn away from it, or keep living foolishly? *[pauseee]*

If you do nothing, you have once again chosen foolishly, but if you turn from folly, and turn to the wisdom of God—now that's the correct response. *[pause]*

So turn from folly, and pursue the wisdom of God! *[pauseeee]*

This turning from something to something else relates to what happens when we respond to the gospel. *[pause]*

In our natural-born state we are fools, for we have sinned against God, and sought our own way.

And that way leads to destruction, hurting ourselves by choosing the path of sin. *[pause]*

So God must open our eyes to see the sinfulness of our sin and the holiness of our God.

And in light of that truth, our foolish, ignorant mouths are silenced. *[pause]*

What can we say or do to save ourselves when we truly see our dire plight? *[pauseeee]*

We would only weary ourselves trying to gain salvation by ourselves, and consume ourselves with endless, empty foolishness.

But now God has lifted our eyes to see Jesus, and what He has done for us on the cross. *[pause]*

When we encounter the crucified and risen Christ, we are led to turn from sin and turn to Him.

And in Him and Him alone, we can be saved through faith—now *that's* the path of wisdom! *[pause]*

Happy are we in Him! *[pauseeee]*

Have you seen the folly of living life apart from God, and turned to Christ, the wisdom of God?⁵
[pause]

If you have turned in faith to Jesus, do you keep following Him and His wisdom? *[pause]*

May God help us to pursue His wisdom every day, asking Him for the wisdom He gives generously to those who ask in faith.⁶

⁵ A reference to a title of Jesus given in 1 Corinthians 1:24.

⁶ A reference to James 1:5–6.