

CHAPTER 10

This chapter seems to be like Solomon's proverbs, a collection of wise sayings and observations, rather than a part of his sermon; but the preacher studied to be sententious, and “set in order many proverbs,” to be brought in in his preaching. Yet the general scope of all the observations in this chapter is to recommend wisdom to us, and its precepts and rules, as of great use for the right ordering of our conversation and to caution us against folly.

I. He recommends wisdom to private persons, who are in an inferior station.

- 1.** It is our wisdom to preserve our reputation, in managing our affairs dexterously (v. 1-3).
- 2.** To be submissive to our superiors if at any time we have offended them (v. 4).
- 3.** To live quiet and peaceable lives, and not to meddle with those that are factious and seditious, and are endeavouring to disturb the government and the public repose, the folly and danger of which disloyal and turbulent practices he shows (v. 8-11).
- 4.** To govern our tongues well (v. 12-15).
- 5.** To be diligent in our business and provide well for our families (v. 18, 19).
- 6.** Not to speak ill of our rulers, no, not in secret (v. 20).

II. He recommends wisdom to rulers; let them not think that, because their subjects must be quiet under them, therefore they may do what they please; no, but,

- 1.** Let them be careful whom they prefer to places of trust and power (v. 5-7).
- 2.** Let them manage themselves discreetly, be generous and not childish, temperate and not luxurious (v. 16, 17). Happy the nation when princes and people make conscience of their duty according to these rules.

❖ ECCLESIASTES 10:1-3

THE ADVANTAGES OF WISDOM

In these verses Solomon shows,

I. What great need wise men have to take heed of being guilty of any instance of folly; for *a little folly* is a great blemish to him that *is in reputation for wisdom and honour*, and is as hurtful to his good name as *dead flies* are to a sweet perfume, not only spoiling the sweetness of it, but making it *to send forth a stinking savour*. Note,

1. True wisdom is true honour, and will gain a man a reputation, which is like a box of precious ointment, pleasing and very valuable.

2. The reputation that is got with difficulty, and by a great deal of wisdom, may be easily lost, and by a *little folly*, because envy fastens upon eminency, and makes the worst of the mistakes and miscarriages of those who are cried up for wisdom, and improves them to their disadvantage; so that the folly which in another would not be taken notice of in them is severely censured. Those who make a great profession of religion have need to walk very circumspectly, to *abstain from all appearances of evil*, and approaches towards it, because many eyes are upon them, that watch for their halting; their character is soon sullied, and they have a great deal of reputation to lose.

II. What a deal of advantage a wise man has above a fool in the management of business (v. 2): *A wise man's heart is at his right hand*, so that he goes about his business with dexterity, turns his hand readily to it, and goes through it with despatch; his counsel and courage are ready to him, whenever he has occasion for them. But *a fool's heart is at his left hand*; it is always to seek when he has any thing to do that is of importance, and therefore he goes awkwardly about it, like a man that is left-handed; he is soon at a loss and at his wits' end.

III. How apt fools are at every turn to proclaim their own folly, and expose themselves; he that is either witless or graceless, either silly or wicked, if he be ever so little from under the check, and left to himself, if he but *walk by the way*, soon shows what he is; his *wisdom fails him*, and, by some impropriety or other, *he says to every one he meets that he is a*

fool (v. 3), that is, he discovers his folly as plainly as if he had told them so. He cannot conceal it, and he is not ashamed of it. Sin is the reproach of sinners wherever they go.

2106 ECCLESIASTES 10:4-11

MUTUAL DUTIES OF PRINCES AND SUBJECTS

The scope of these verses is to keep subjects loyal and dutiful to the government. In Solomon's reign the people were very rich, and lived in prosperity, which perhaps made them proud and petulant, and when the taxes were high, though they had enough to pay them with, it is probable that many conducted themselves insolently towards the government and threatened to rebel. To such Solomon here gives some necessary cautions.

I. Let not subjects carry on a quarrel with their prince upon any private personal disgust (v. 4): "*If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, if upon some misinformation given him, or some mismanagement of thine, he is displeased at thee, and threaten thee, yet leave not thy place, forget not the duty of a subject, revolt not from thy allegiance, do not, in a passion, quit thy post in his service and throw up thy commission, as despairing ever to regain his favour. No, wait awhile, and thou wilt find he is not implacable, but that yielding pacifies great offences.*" Solomon speaks for himself, and for every wise and good man that is a master, or a magistrate, that he could easily forgive those, upon their submission, whom yet, upon their provocation, he had been very angry with. It is safer and better to yield to an angry prince than to contend with him.

II. Let not subjects commence a quarrel with their prince, though the public administration be not in every thing as they would have it. He grants *there is an evil often seen under the sun*, and it is a king's-evil, an evil which the king only can cure, for *it is an error which proceeds from the ruler* (v. 5); it is a mistake which rulers, consulting their personal affections more than the public interests, are too often guilty of, that men are not preferred according to their merit, but *folly is set in great dignity*, men of shattered brains, and broken fortunes, are put in places of power and trust, while the rich men of good sense and good estates, whose interest would oblige them to be true to the public, and whose abundance

would be likely to set them above temptations to bribery and extortion, yet sit in low places, and can get no preferment (v. 6), either the ruler knows not how to value them or the terms of preferment are such as they cannot in conscience comply with. It is ill with a people when vicious men are advanced and men of worth are kept under hatches. This is illustrated v. 7. “*I have seen servants upon horses*, men not so much of mean extraction and education (if that were all, it were the more excusable, nay, there is many a wise servant who with good reason *has rule over a son that causes shame*), but of sordid, servile, mercenary dispositions. I have seen these riding in pomp and state as princes, while princes, men of noble birth and qualities, fit to rule a kingdom, have been forced to *walk as servants upon the earth*, poor and despised.” Thus God, in his providence, punishes a wicked people; but, as far as it is the ruler's act and deed, it is certainly his *error*, and a *great evil*, a grievance to the subject and very provoking; but it is *an error under the sun*, which will certainly be rectified above the sun, and when it shall shine no more, for in heaven it is only wisdom and holiness that are set in great dignity. But, if the prince be guilty of his error, yet let not the subjects *leave their place*, nor rise up against the government, nor form any project for the alteration of it; nor let the prince carry on the humour too far, nor set such servants, such beggars, on horseback, as will ride furiously over the ancient land-marks of the constitution, and threaten the subversion of it.

1. Let neither prince nor people violently attempt any changes, nor make a forcible entry upon a national settlement, for they will both find it of dangerous consequence, which he shows here by four similitudes, the scope of which is to give us a caution not to meddle to our own hurt. Let not princes invade the rights and liberties of their subjects; let not subjects mutiny and rebel against their princes; for,

(1.) *He that digs a pit* for another, it is ten to one but he *falls into it* himself, and his violent dealing returns upon his own head. If princes become tyrants, or subjects become rebels, all histories will tell both what is likely to be their fate and that it is at their utmost peril, and it were better for both to be content within their own bounds.

(2.) *Whoso breaks a hedge*, an old hedge, that has long been a land-mark, let him expect that a *serpent*, or *adder*, such as harbour in rotten hedges, will *bite him*; some viper or other will fasten upon his hand, ~~4RB~~ Acts 28:3. God, by his ordinance, as by a hedge, has inclosed the prerogatives and

powers of princes; their persons are under his special protection; those therefore that form any treasonable designs against their peace, their crown, and dignity, are but twisting halters for themselves.

(3.) *Whoso removes stones*, to pull down a wall or building, does but pluck them upon himself; he shall be *hurt therewith*, and will wish that he had let them alone. Those that go about to alter a well-modelled well-settled government, under colour of redressing some grievances and correcting some faults in it, will quickly perceive not only that it is easier to find fault than to mend, to demolish that which is good than to build up that which is better, but that they thrust their own fingers into the fire and overwhelm themselves in the ruin they occasion.

(4.) *He that cleaves the wood*, especially if, as it follows, he has sorry tools (v. 10), *shall be endangered thereby*; the chips, or his own axe-head, will fly in his face. If we meet with knotty pieces of timber, and we think to master them by force and violence, and hew them to pieces, they may not only prove too hard for us, but the attempt may turn to our own damage.

2. Rather let both prince and people act towards each other with prudence, mildness, and good temper: *Wisdom is profitable to direct* the ruler how to manage a people that are inclined to be turbulent, so as neither, on the one hand, by a supine negligence to embolden and encourage them, nor, on the other hand, by rigour and severity to exasperate and provoke them to any seditious practices. It is likewise profitable to direct the subjects how to act towards a prince that is inclined to bear hard upon them, so as not to alienate his affections from them, but to win upon him by humble remonstrances (not insolent demands, such as the people made upon Rehoboam), by patient submissions and peaceable expedients. The same rule is to be observed in all relations, for the preserving of the comfort of them. Let wisdom direct to gentle methods and forbear violent ones.

(1.) Wisdom will teach us to whet the tool we are to make use of, rather than, by leaving it blunt, oblige ourselves to exert so much the *more strength*, v. 10. We might save ourselves a great deal of labour, and prevent a great deal of danger, if we did whet before we cut, that is, consider and premeditate what is fit to be said and done in every difficult case, that we may accommodate ourselves to it and may do our work smoothly and easily both to others and to ourselves. Wisdom will direct how to sharpen and put an edge upon both ourselves and those we employ,

not to *work deceitfully* (^{<451D>}Psalm 52:2), but to work cleanly and cleverly. The mower loses no time when he is whetting his scythe.

(2.) Wisdom will teach us to enchant the serpent we are to contend with, rather than think to out-hiss it (v. 11): *The serpent will bite* if he be not by singing and music charmed and enchanted, against which therefore he *stops his ears* (^{<480A>}Psalm 58:4, 5); *and a babbler is no better* to all those who enter the lists with him, who therefore must not think by dint of words to out-talk him, but be prudent management to enchant him. *He that is lord of the tongue* (so the phrase is), a ruler that has liberty of speech and may say what he will, it is as dangerous dealing with him as with a serpent uncharmed; but, if you use the enchantment of a mild and humble submission, you may be safe and out of danger; herein *wisdom*, the meekness of wisdom, *is profitable to direct*. *By long forbearing is a prince persuaded*, (^{<185>}Proverbs 25:15. Jacob enchanted Esau with a present and Abigail David. To those that may say any thing it is wisdom to say nothing that is provoking.

^{<11D>}ECCLESIASTES 10:12-15

THE CONTEMPTIBLENESS OF FOLLY

Solomon, having shown the benefit of wisdom, and of what great advantage it is to us in the management of our affairs, here shows the mischief of folly and how it exposes men, which perhaps comes in as a reflection upon those rulers who *set folly in great dignity*.

I. Fools talk a great deal to no purpose, and they show their folly as much by the multitude, impertinence, and mischievousness of their words, as by any thing; whereas *the words of a wise man's mouth are gracious*, are grace, manifest grace in his heart and minister grace to the hearers, are good, and such as become him, and do good to all about him, *the lips of a fool* not only expose him to reproach and make him ridiculous, but *will swallow up himself* and bring him to ruin, by provoking the government to take cognizance of his seditious talk and call him to an account for it. Adonijah foolishly *spoke against his own life*, (^{<102>}1 Kings 2:23. Many a man has been sunk by having *his own tongue fall upon him*, (^{<468>}Psalm 64:8. See what a fool's talk is.

1. It takes rise from his own weakness and wickedness: *The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness*, the foolishness bound up in his heart, that is the corrupt spring out of which all these polluted streams flow, the evil treasure out of which evil things are brought. As soon as he begins to speak you may perceive his folly; at the very first he talks idly, and passionately, and like himself.

2. It rises up to fury, and tends to the hurt and injury of others: *The end of his talk*, the end it comes to, *is madness*. He will presently talk himself into an indecent heat, and break out into the wild extravagancies of a distracted man. The end he aims at is mischief; as, at first, he appeared to have little government of himself, so, at last, it appears he has a great deal of malice to his neighbours; that root of bitterness bears gall and wormwood. Note, It is not strange if those that begin foolishly end madly; for an ungoverned tongue, the more liberty is allowed, grows the more violent.

3. It is all the same over and over (v. 14): *A fool also is full of words*, a passionate fool especially, that runs on endlessly and never knows when to leave off. He will have the last word, though it be but the same with that which was the first. What is wanting in the weight and strength of his words he endeavours in vain to make up in the number of them; and they must be repeated, because otherwise there is nothing in them to make them regarded. Note, Many who are empty of sense are *full of words*; and the least solid are the most noisy. The following words may be taken either,

(1.) As checking him for his vainglorious boasting in the multitude of his words, what he will do and what he will have, not considering that which every body knows that *a man cannot tell what shall be* in his own time, while he lives (^{27:1}Proverbs 27:1), much less can one tell *what shall be after him*, when he is dead and gone. Would we duly consider our own ignorance of, and uncertainty about, future events, it would cut off a great many of the idle words we foolishly multiply. Or,

(2.) As mocking him for his tautologies. He is *full of words*, for if he do but speak the most trite and common thing, *a man cannot tell what shall be*, because he loves to hear himself talk, he will say it again, *what shall be after him who can tell him?* like Battus in Ovid:

— *Sub illis*

Montibus (inquit) erant, et erant sub montibus illis —

*Under those mountains were they,
They were under those mountains, I say —*

whence vain repetitions are called *Battologies*, ^{<406>}Matthew 6:7.

II. Fools toil a great deal to no purpose (v. 15); *The labour of the foolish, to accomplish their designs, wearies every one of them.*

1. They weary themselves in that labour which is very foolish and absurd. All their labour is for the world and the body, and the meat that perishes, and in this labour they spend their strength, and exhaust their spirits, and *weary themselves for very vanity*, ^{<313>}Habakkuk 2:13; ^{<251>}Isaiah 55:2. They choose that service which is perfect drudgery rather than that which is perfect liberty.

2. That labour which is necessary, and would be profitable, and might be gone through with ease, wearies them, because they go about it awkwardly and foolishly, and so make their business a toil to them, which, if they applied themselves to it prudently, would be a pleasure to them. Many complain of the labours of religion as grievous, which they would have no reason to complain of if the exercises of Christian piety were always under the direction of Christian prudence. The foolish tire themselves in endless pursuits, and never bring any thing to pass, *because they know not how to go to the city*, that is, because they have not capacity to apprehend the plainest thing, such as the entrance into a great city is, where one would think it were impossible for a man to miss his road. Men's imprudent management of their business robs them both of the comfort and of the benefit of it. But it is the excellency of the way to the heavenly city that it is a high-way, in which the *wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err* (^{<258>}Isaiah 35:8); yet sinful folly makes men miss that way.

^{<216>}**ECCLESIASTES 10:16-20**

MUTUAL DUTIES OF PRINCES AND SUBJECTS

Solomon here observes,

I. How much the happiness of a land depends upon the character of its rulers; it is well or ill with the people according as the princes are good or bad.

1. The people cannot be happy when their princes are childish and voluptuous (v. 16): *Woe unto thee, O land!* even the land of Canaan itself, though otherwise the glory of all lands, when *thy king is a child*, not so much in age (Solomon himself was young when his kingdom was happy in him) as in understanding; when the prince is weak and foolish as a child, fickle and fond of changes, fretful and humoursome, easily imposed upon, and hardly brought to business, it is ill with the people. The body staggers if the head be giddy. Perhaps Solomon wrote this with a foresight of his son Rehoboam's ill conduct (^{<4407>}2 Chronicles 13:7); he was a child all the days of his life and his family and kingdom fared the worse for it. Nor is it much better with a people when their princes *eat in the morning*, that is, make a god of their belly and make themselves slaves to their appetites. If the king himself be a child, yet if the princes and privy-counsellors are wise and faithful, and apply themselves to business, the land may do the better; but if they addict themselves to their pleasures, and prefer the gratifications of the flesh before the despatch of the public business, which they disfit themselves for by eating and drinking *in a morning*, when judges are epicures, and do not eat to live, but live to eat, what good can a nation expect!

2. The people cannot but be happy when their rulers are generous and active, sober and temperate, and men of business, v. 17. The land is then blessed,

(1.) When the sovereign is governed by principles of honour, *when the king is the son of nobles*, actuated and animated by a noble spirit, which scorns to do any thing base and unbecoming so high a character, which is solicitous for the public welfare, and prefers that before any private interests. Wisdom, virtue, and the fear of God, beneficence, and a readiness to do good to all mankind, these ennoble the royal blood.

(2.) When the subordinate magistrates are more in care to discharge their trusts than to gratify their appetites; when they *eat in due season* (^{<4855>}Psalm 145:15); let us not take ours unseasonable, lest we lose the comfort of seeing God give it to us. Magistrates should *eat for strength*, that their bodies may be fitted to serve their souls in the service of God and their country, *and not for drunkenness*, to make themselves unfit to do any thing either for God or man, and particularly to *sit in judgment*, for they will *err through wine* (^{<2807>}Isaiah 28:7), will *drink and forget the law*, ^{<2805>}Proverbs 31:5. It is well with a people when their princes are examples

of temperance, when those that have most to spend upon themselves know how to deny themselves.


II. Of what ill consequence slothfulness is both to private and public affairs (v. 18): *By much slothfulness and idleness of the hands*, the neglect of business, and the love of ease and pleasure, *the building decays, drops through* first, and by degrees drops down. If it be not kept well covered, and care be not taken to repair the breaches, as any happen, it will rain in, and the timber will rot, and the house will become unfit to dwell in. It is so with the family and the affairs of it; if men cannot find in their hearts to take pains in their callings, to tend their shops and look after their own business, they will soon run in debt and go behind-hand, and, instead of making what they have more for their children, will make it less. It is so with the public; if the king be *a child* and will take no care, if the *princes eat in the morning* and will take no pains, the affairs of the nation suffer loss, and its interests are prejudiced, its honour is sullied, its power is weakened, its borders are encroached upon, the course of justice is obstructed, the treasure is exhausted, and all its foundations are out of course, and all this through the slothfulness of self-seeking of those that should be the *repairers of its breaches and the restorers of paths to dwell in*, ²⁸⁰²Isaiah 58:12.

III. How industrious generally all are, both princes and people, to get money, because that serves for all purposes, v. 19. He seems to prefer money before mirth: *A feast is made for laughter*, not merely for eating, but chiefly for pleasant conversation and the society of friends, not the laughter of the fool, which is madness, but that of wise men, by which they fit themselves for business and severe studies. Spiritual feasts are made for spiritual laughter, holy joy in God. *Wine makes merry, makes glad the life, but money* is the measure of all things and *answers all things*. *Pecuniae obediunt omnia — Money commands all things*. Though *wine make merry*, it will not be a house for us, nor a bed, nor clothing, nor provisions and portions for children; *but money*, if men have enough of it, will be all these. The feast cannot be made without money, and, though men have wine, they are not so much disposed to be merry unless they have money for the necessary supports of life. Money of itself answers nothing; it will neither feed nor clothe; but, as it is the instrument of commerce, it answers all the occasions of this present life. What is to be had may be had for money. But it answers nothing to the soul; it will not procure the pardon of sin, the favour of God, the peace of conscience; the

soul, as it is not redeemed, so it is not maintained, with *corruptible things as silver and gold*. Some refer this to rulers; it is ill with the people when they give up themselves to luxury and riot, feasting and making merry, not only because their business is neglected, but because money must be had to *answer all these things*, and, in order to that, the people squeezed by heavy taxes.

IV. How cautious subjects have need to be that they harbour not any disloyal purposes in their minds, nor keep up any factious cabals or consultations against the government, because it is ten to one that they are discovered and brought to light, v. 20. “Though rulers should be guilty of some errors, yet be not, upon all occasions, arraigning their administration and running them down, but make the best of them.” Here,

1. The command teaches us our duty “*Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought*, do not wish ill to the government in thy mind.” All sin begins there, and therefore the first risings of it must be curbed and suppressed, and particularly that of treason and sedition. “*Curse not the rich*, the princes and governors, *in thy bed-chamber*, in a conclave or club of persons disaffected to the government; associate not with such; *come not into their secret*; join not with them in speaking ill of the government or plotting against it.”

2. The reason consults our safety. “Though the design be carried on ever so closely, *a bird of the air shall carry the voice* to the king, who has more spies about than thou art aware of, *and that which has wings shall tell the matter*, to thy confusion and ruin.” God sees what men do, and hears what they say, in secret; and, when he pleases, he can bring it to light by strange and unsuspected ways. *Wouldst thou then not be hurt by the powers that be, nor be afraid of them? Do that which is good and thou shalt have praise of the same; but, if thou do that which is evil, be afraid,*  Romans 13:3, 4.