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Sensible Living

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 10:1-11:6

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So, when it comes to cars, I'm the guy that likes to drive them till they die. My last vehicle went a little over 300,000 miles. And Patty's Honda currently is at 310,000 miles, and still drives like it's new. So here's the secret. You probably want to write this down. *(laughter)* You have to get it in your head that this is a nice car, almost like it was new. So, you keep taking care of it and doing the maintenance and all that's required, because as soon as you get it in your head that this is just a piece of junk, the end is near. I think that's kind of the point the Preacher is wanting to make in Ecclesiastes in our text this week. Yes, the world is broken; it's fallen; it's getting pretty junky. But if, in your mind, you decide there's no meaning, there's no purpose, there's no point of even trying, you've resigned yourself to living like a fool, and you're going to make your life far more miserable than it needs to be. We can do better than that. We just need to be sensible.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible with you, turn to Ecclesiastes, Chapter 10. If the summer study in Ecclesiastes has felt a little bit like a long night, if you looked at the horizon this morning, there is the slightest bit of light telling us the sun is going to come up again. And that will be more evident next week, and then the final week. Ecclesiastes, chapter 10, like a lot of these chapters, is very difficult to organize. It just kind of feels like an almost random collection of proverbs. But they all have one basic theme, and that is this whole idea of learning to live more skillfully, or sensibly, in a culture that's dominated by fools. So, at the end of Chapter 9, the last phrase: **…but one sinner destroys much good…**if you remove the chapter break, I think it just keeps rolling with that conversation. Verse 1:

> **Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom *and* honor.** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 10:1)

Sometimes I get a little humored by commentators that just drift off the point. I can't tell you how many commentaries I read where they're trying to figure out how a decaying fly makes the perfume stink. It's like, "I don't know; it's not really the point." The point is coming off of the end of Chapter 9—**one sinner destroys much good**—and apparently a few flies, dead in the ointment, ruins the smell. But the point that follows is that **…a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.** In other words, if you put an equal amount of wisdom and honor on one end of the scale, and the same amount of foolishness on the other end of the scale, the foolishness is going to be weightier, because it only takes a little foolishness to make a mess of things. It only takes a little foolishness to wreck a marriage. It only takes a little foolishness to blow up a family. It only takes a little foolishness to bankrupt a business. It only takes a little foolishness to make a mess of our country. So they're not equally weighted.

This last week, you could have spent all day—every day—doing good things, but have one moment of foolishness. But, that one moment of foolishness is going to outweigh all the other good things that you did. I could spend all day today doing good deeds, but if I spent ten minutes robbing the local Quick Stop, that ten minutes of foolishness is going to define my life for a long time. So that's the point he's making. Therefore, we need to live more skillfully, because it doesn't take a lot of foolishness to make a mess of things. Verse 2:

> **A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but the foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left.**

Now this is just like right and wrong. Don't read into this like political right and left. That's not the point. But it is making the point like, "How does that happen? How does someone end up on the foolish path? Did they just get lost in a fork in the road and make the wrong turn?" And the text says, "No, it doesn't work that way. Foolish people are foolish because there's something wrong with their heart." *Heart,* in the Old Testament, was not emotion, like we tend to think of it. Heart was like the core of your person. It's how you think. It's what you believe to be true. It's how you operate. And what the text is saying is that, ultimately, in your heart, what you believe to be true—whether you think this world is so far gone there's no point even trying—or whether you think, "No, it's not right," I believe we can live better than that. We can live skillfully. It's like what's in your heart is going to determine if you go to the left, or to the right. But once you make that turn, then that's what's going to follow, which is what he says in the next verse 3:

> **Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone *that* he is a fool.**

That's actually a very important verse to understand, in order to better understand our conversation. It's not that that person just makes a wrong turn, and now they travel down that path. It's that a fool takes the fool's path, because they're a fool. Newsflash! So the fool is going to continue to act like a fool. That's what the text says. They're just going to continue to demonstrate on that path, foolish decisions. In order to live a more skillful life, you have to come to grips with the fact that fools are going to act like fools. We cause ourselves a lot of frustration when we keep thinking fools are going to act like wise people. They don't. That's why they're down that path. And so fools are going to continue to act like fools. I know that; I expect that. That should, then, affect how I respond, as it says in verse 4:

> **If the ruler's temper** (could be like mood) **rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays** (like deescalates) **great offenses.**

So a ruler could be anyone in a position of authority. This could be someone at home; this could be someone in your school; this could be someone where you work, someone in the community, someone in the country. There's no question that there's no shortage of fools in positions of authority. And a fool is going to act like a fool. That's what we just learned. So what the text is saying is, rather than reacting—that's the idea of abandoning your position and just getting mad—

with the implication that the person in authority is going to make you miserable, you've escalated the situation. One of the dangers is that fools have a tendency to turn other people into fools. When the fool is in a position of authority and acts like a fool, we just react, we react with anger; we react with frustration. Typically, when we react, whatever that reaction is, it's not wise. It's not skillful. It's a reaction, and the fool has just turned us into a fool. And what the text says is, what's better than that is if we respond more skillfully. We respond with composure, which actually deescalates the situation and keeps it from becoming worse than it needed to be. So, again, it's this idea that we live in a fallen world, and there's no shortage of fools. Fools are in positions of authority, and fools do things that are foolish. Our temptation is just to react to that and escalate the situation. So, in our 21st century, this could be face to face, but often it is not. It's through texting; it's through social media; it's through emails. It's this reaction when somebody posts something on social media that we don't like, so we react to it, and we just escalate the situation and make it worse. And what the text is saying is, "We can do better than that. We can respond more skillfully than that."

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, it feels like everyone is offended by everything. Somebody told me this week, "All it takes is just one wrong word, and everything blows up." And that is right. Everybody is tippy-toeing around, trying to avoid certain words that are going to blow everything up, because people will be offended. This is the culture in which we live. So, we have what we refer to as a *cancel culture*. Cancel culture comes because we live in a culture of fools, where people have lost the most basic life skills. We no longer possess the most basic social, personal skills, to sit down face to face, and work something out. So, because we've completely lost those skills, we don't know what to do, so we cancel. That's not the response of a skillful person. We understand fools are going to act like fools. I can't change that. I can't fix that. But I can control how I choose to respond to that. One of the things I've settled over the years is, if someone sends me an angry email, all you're going to get from me is, "If you'd like to come in, I'd be happy to talk about it." I'm just not going to do it in an email. We've just lost our social, personal skills. I'm not going to argue that way. So the text is offering us a better way to live. Verse 5:

> **There is an evil I have seen under the sun,** (meaning he's observed) **like an error which goes forth from the ruler— folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. I have seen slaves *riding* on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.** (Vs. 5-7)

So here is what he's saying. Fools end up in positions of authority, and fools are going to act like fools. So, what they do is surround themselves with other fools, which ultimately turns the world upside down. When he's talking about the rich, he's using it almost like a synonym for someone who lives responsibly, someone who has some capacity, someone who could be of great service. But those with responsibility and capacity are kicked to the curb, so that other fools surround the fools. Everything gets turned upside down, to where he just says, **I've seen the slaves riding on horses, and the prince is walking like slaves.** It's all mixed up. 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.** (Vs. 8-10)

So, what's he talking about there? He's describing normal labor—normal chores—but in the process, there are some risks. *Dig a pit,* and you might fall into it. *Break through a wall*, and there might be a snake sleeping in the coolness of the stones, and you might get bit. You're working in a *quarry*, and the rock may fall down and wound you. If you're *chopping wood*, you may end up getting hurt. But then he really gets to the point. *But if the axe is dull, sharpen it*! This isn't rocket science. This is sensible living. Why would you spend all day beating a log to death with a dull axe when you could take five minutes to just sharpen it. And that's why he says this is his summary in verse 10: **Wisdom has the advantage of giving success.** This is just a kind of imagery. If you're digging a hole, be careful you don't fall in it. If you're knocking down a wall, be careful there might be a snake in it. If you're working in a quarry, be careful, a rock might fall on you, and for crying out loud, if you're chopping wood, just stop and sharpen the axe. It's common sense. It's sensibility. Wisdom has its advantages. That's a simple point he's making. Verse 11:

> **If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.**

A little bit of humor in this. In the ancient world, snake charmers were not unusual. They would typically set up somewhere, and they would charm the snake to entertain the folks. If people liked it, they would give them a little money, kind of like a street performer today. But what he's saying is, the fool doesn't have any idea what he's doing. He's just going to set up somewhere and charm the snake and get some money. But, because he has no idea what he's doing, the snake bites him before he can charm it. He is not going to get paid. He's not going to get paid because it's lousy entertainment. But he's also not going to get paid, because he's dead. So, it's just like this foolish, reckless thing to do. It is also possible that the idea of a serpent carries the idea of the tongue. Going back into verse 4, the idea is that this snake is like the tongue that's out of control,. The fool doesn't know how to charm it, so the fool gets bit. But someone with more skill knows how to charm the tongue, and actually deescalates the situation. That seems likely, given the verse that follows:

> **Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. Yet the fool multiplies words** (The fool can't stop talking.) **No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city.** (Vs. 12-15)

So what he says is, a fool starts talking, and out of his or her mouth comes foolishness. But they can't stop. It's like a faucet that's been turned on and it just keeps coming. It multiplies words, and pretty soon it goes from just foolishness to something that's hurtful, something that's destructive, something that does damage. But nobody can seem to get it turned off. We've probably all been in

environments where a fool starts talking, and you know where this is going, and you know it's going to be destructive, and you just want to say, "Please stop talking, before, you know, it gets out of control." But they just keep going; they can't shut the faucet off. So it goes from foolishness to a lot of damage, and who knows where it's going, because the fool just keeps talking. The last verse in there is saying the fool gets so confused, gets so weary, becomes so foolish, so turned around, that they can't even find their way back home.

This is the culture in which we live. There is no shortage of fools. There is no shortage of fools in positions of authority. We talk about and process and believe the most crazy things as a culture, things that are so obvious, things that are so clear, that there should not be any confusion about this. But the fools start talking, and they won't stop talking, and pretty soon everybody's so confused that we have lost our most basic abilities to function in a culture. We've gotten to the point where there are so many people that literally do not have the most basic people/social skills to function in a society. People can't even build friendships. They can't even build relationships. We've become so foolish as a culture, people can't even find their way home. That's what he's saying there. Verse 16:

> **Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad** (…not age, but immaturity) **and whose princes feast** (feast meaning like a drunken party) **in the morning.**

Woe to the land that has a king that's never grown up. He surrounds himself with more fools, and by mid-morning they're all engaged in a drunken party, like a bad frat house. And while the people go without their needs being met, the people go without what they need from the people in authority. They're just having a drunken party every day. Woe to those people that live that way. Verse 17:

> **Blessed** (or happy) **are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness. Through indolence** (meaning laziness) **the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. *Men* prepare a meal for enjoyment,** (meaning a drunken party) **and wine makes life merry and money is the answer to everything. Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms no not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known.** (Vs. 17-20)

So here's what he's saying there. He's saying when that kind of a king is in charge, when people in authority are fools, and they surround themselves with fools, everything is going to fall apart. The rafters are sagging; the roof is leaking, which may just be a metaphor for the kingdom is falling apart. But they're busy eating and drinking and making merry, and by mid-morning they're drunk. They just party every day, and the money that could have been used to repair the kingdom, to take care of the people, is just being used to keep the party going. So when that happens, it's likely we're frustrated; it's likely we're angry. So what he says is, "Be careful what you do with that." If you go back to your place and you curse the king because you're mad, because you're frustrated,

it's possible there will be a little birdie there that will hear what you said, take it back to the king, and the king will likely chop off your head. So, again, it's kind of this idea, "Yes, there are fools, and there are fools in positions of authority, and they surround themselves with fools." But if we just react to that, we're just going to make ourselves more miserable. It's much better to respond skillfully or we're just going to make life worse than it needed to be. So, perhaps you come out of that discussion in Chapter 10 and think, "Well then, what's the point? You know, just roll over…give up…it seems hopeless." What he says then in chapter 11, verses 1-6 is, "No, that's not the skillful way to respond. That's not a sensible way to live. Yes, this is the way it is, but we still need to respond rightly." Verse 1:

> **Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will bind it after many days. Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, whether the tree falls, there it lies. He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones *are formed* in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.**
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> **Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.** Chapter 11:1-6)

So here's what he's saying. The opening line: ***Cast your bread on the waters*** could be translated as something like: *Send your grain on the waters.* It's talking about commerce; it's talking about business. It's like, "Yes, all these things we've talked about are true. But, you still have to function; you still have to move forward; you still need to be responsible, to run your business. Take your grain, and put it on the ships. The ships take it to market and, hopefully, in a few days, you're going to get a return for it. But recognize also that the world is fallen; recognize the ship could sink or be attacked by pirates. You could get to the other side, and realize that people don't want to pay for it, and you don't get anything out of it. So verse 2 is saying: "Diversify. Don't put all your grain on one ship, but a little bit here, a little bit there." You have to be skillful in how you think about how you do this in a fallen world.

In verse 3, the clouds that go over may have rain; they may not. If they're full of moisture, they rain. If not, they don't. You can't do anything about it. That's the way it is. The next says that if the wind comes up and blows your tree over, it may fall to the north or to the south. Either way, there it is. Deal with it! Now, I just want to point out that when we broke up these passages, we determined months ago that this passage would happen on this weekend, because we knew ahead of time that the storm was coming Wednesday, and your trees would fall over. I just want you to be impressed with that! *(laughter)* There may only be one verse in the entire Bible that says that, so it's interesting that it's this weekend! Which by the way, I don't need to see any more pictures of trees laying over in your yard. After the first one hundred or so, they just all look the same; it

looks like a tree. But what the text says is, you don't know if it's going to fall on your yard or fall on your car. It could do either. There's no way to know, but whichever it did, there it is! That's what happened. Deal with it.

So he goes on to say that because that's true, people then freeze up. They're paralyzed with fear. They're defined by inactivity, so they don't do anything. They look at the clouds, and they don't know if it's going to rain or not rain, or if the wind is going to blow, so they don't sow their seed. And because they didn't sow their seed, they're not going to reap. And because they're not going to reap, they're not going to have any food, and they're going to die. So, he's back to his point: You've got to live more skillfully than that. You've got to sow the seed. We don't know which way the wind is going to blow. This is 3000 years ago. They didn't know what made the wind, and they didn't know where it came from. They don't know how it's possible that this little baby grows in the mother's womb, and is finally born as a child. They don't know all the mysteries of what God is doing. They don't know the story that God is weaving in His tapestry. There's a lot of things we don't know, a lot of things we can't figure out, a lot of stuff in a fallen world…especially in a fallen world full of fools. So what do you do? You do what you can do! This is what it is. So you sow in the morning and you sow again in the evening. You don't know, maybe it'll rain in the morning; maybe it'll rain in the evening; maybe it'll rain both times. But you must do what you can do. That's the sensible way to live.

So, think about it outside of the sowing and reaping discussion. Take for example, health. You should eat healthy; you should exercise; you should take care of yourself. But does that mean you won't get cancer? No, lots of healthy people get cancer and die. But it still is the most sensible way to live. You may never be rich. You may never have a big house. You may never have a new car. You may never have a whole bunch of money in the bank. So, what do you do? Well, you do what you can do. You can get up in the morning; you can go to work; you can work hard. You can bring home a paycheck; you can be responsible with your money. That you can do. So that's the sensible way to live.

I can't do anything about all the fools in our culture. I can't change them. I can't fix them. Many of them are in positions of authority; I can't do anything about that. What I can do is choose how I'm going to respond. I can choose not to become foolish myself, by reacting to the fools around me. I can choose to be loving. I can choose to be kind. I can choose to be patient. I can choose to be compassionate. I don't have to get sucked into all this anger and foolishness that defines our culture. I don't have to. I can choose to do better. I think it's possible that this time, right now, is potentially the greatest opportunity for the church in my lifetime, because the culture is so confused. It's so dark. It's so despairing. It's so foolish, that it provides the opportunity to be the church. But my fear is we're going to biff it. We're going to miss our moment, because we're so caught up in the anger and the foolishness and the politics of our culture, that the fools are turning us into fools. We can do better than that. We can live more skillfully than that. I've said this before. You can wish all day long that things were different. They're not different! This is the way they are, and this is how it is right now, today. So, whatever your situation is today, this is what it is. So, what does it look like for you, in your situation, to live skillfully today? That is sensible living.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that through no performance of our own, You opened up our eyes to the truth of the gospel. You've changed our lives and You've given us hope. Lord, You've called us as your church to be a light in the darkness. We can't be that if we're going to act like fools. Lord, may we be set apart. May we live more skillfully, that others might come to know the Jesus who saved our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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