

## **Living with Eyes Wide Open**

Ecclesiastes 10:8-20

If you travel to Westgate Church from the south, then you're familiar with the little road dance called "dodge the potholes." Thankfully Natick recently got their act together and redid their part of Winter Street; maybe Weston will soon follow suit. But it was nothing short of dramatic to be cruising down Winter Street, in the rain, trying to swerve and miss them lest you run your suspension into the ground or lose a muffler or something.

There's a reason that Scripture often uses roads and paths as an analogy for life. You never know what's around the corner or over the hill. You have to watch out for potholes and other dangerous hazards. Sometimes you hit dead ends or have to take detours, and so on. It's a rich metaphor, and one that reminds us of the necessity of living with our eyes wide open. Paying attention to the path in front of us. In other words, living wisely. Living wisely. Only a fool would cruise down Winter Street at 30mph with his eyes closed, or his eyes on something other than the road in front of him. Wisdom—godly wisdom—opens our eyes to walk faithfully with God on the often uneven path of life.

Our passage this morning is a continuation of our passage from last week, ch. 9:11–10:7, and what true success looks like in an upside down world—a world that doesn't always work the way it's supposed, that doesn't ultimately satisfy, and that doesn't always value what God values. Unlike how the wisdom of the world defines success (money, achievement, power, prestige), we saw how the wisdom of God tells us that true success is *being faithful to God and his purposes*—fearing God him and treating him with the respect and reverence he deserves as the Creator, King, and Savior of the universe. And walking faithfully with God in an upside down world requires wisdom, which is not just knowledge or information, but how we apply that knowledge to life. Wisdom is skill for living. It opens our eyes to life's dangers—the dangers of folly or foolishness. And our passage this morning is going to highlight four general dangers, four car-eating potholes, if you will, and how to navigate them in our pursuit of God and his purposes.

The book of Ecclesiastes has shown us that wisdom is limited. It cannot answer every problem, every trial, every danger in life. We're told elsewhere that both the wise and the foolish face the same destination under the sun—the grave (cf. 2:12-16). And that in the meantime, sometimes the fools have all the fun and all the money, while the wise suffer (cf. 1:18; 9:11). But just because wisdom is not a silver bullet for avoiding life's problems, does not mean that we should ignore it, or worse yet, plunge headlong into folly and foolishness. There is serious, eternal danger in foolishness. And though wisdom can't protect us from all suffering, it can keep us close to God.

Now, just as bumps on the road can be quite random, so the Preacher's instructions are somewhat random as he addresses the various scenarios of life. But we can identify four general dangers that he warns us against, along with how godly wisdom helps us keep our eyes open and on the path as we navigate the often uneven terrain of life.

The first hazard he points out is *the danger of robbing others* in v. 8, which comes from taking our eyes off the path and fixing them on what others have. Look with me at v. 8: "He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall." Now some take this as honest laborers going about their business and getting hurt, not unlike what we'll see in v. 9 in a minute. But the imagery of digging a pit and falling into it is a metaphor in Scripture for the poetic justice of someone who tries to rob someone else. They dig a pit along the road to set a trap and capture a passerby in order to rob them, but in the process fall into it and get captured themselves, as we see in Psalm 7:

Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies. He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends. (Ps. 7:14-16)

The second image in v. 8 is similar: breaking through a wall is breaking and entering, and it's met with the same result—in the process of trying to rob from someone else, the thief tearing through the wall gets bit by a snake living in the wall (cf. Amos 5:19). Poetic justice. It is utterly foolish and dangerous to think that we can take advantage of others and not have our folly come back on our heads. That's the picture here.

I would venture to guess that most of us aren't sitting here plotting burglary or armed robbery. But that doesn't mean we don't face the same temptation to take advantage of someone else for the sake of selfish gain. We may not have the skills of a burglar, but we have the heart of one—every one of us. From the seemingly insignificant ways we get what we want without paying for it—pirating DVDs, illegally downloading music—to cheating others out of money—padding our business expenses, cheating on our taxes—to sabotaging someone else's job or career in order to land a promotion or secure that account. We want things, and we want them so badly, that we're willing to disregard God and destroy the lives of others to get them. This is deadly and foolish, and the stupidest part of it is thinking that we'll never get caught, that we'll never face justice, either in heaven or on earth.

This kind of foolishness reflects a very small view of God. It's a small view of God's goodness—that he's not really the kind of God who would provide for his people, so I need to take what I want instead. It's a small view of God's holiness—that God isn't so set apart and perfect, and so sin isn't really that big of deal. It's a small view of God's power, that even if he is good enough, he's incapable of providing, or if he is holy, he's not strong enough to actually judge wrongdoers. And it reflects a tiny view of God's mercy, that he hasn't really done much to meet our needs or rescue us from our problems, not least our rebellion against him.

This is a very small view of God. But such a small view creates big problems when you finally meet him face to face, like Trumpkin in Lewis's *Prince Caspian*, who dismissed not only the power of Aslan but his very existence, until he encountered the lion face to face at the end of the book.

But if wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord—with recognizing that he's God and I'm not, then wisdom points us to the bigness of God. It reminds us of the magnitude of God's goodness

and holiness—how the God who rules from heaven and owns the entire world is uniquely worthy of our trust and obedience. It reminds us of his power to accomplish all his purposes, to provide and protect, to rescue and to judge. And it moves us to depend on his mercy, which he demonstrated by sending his Son to take the just punishment we deserved for our greedy hearts on himself, in our place on the cross, that through trusting in him we might receive full pardon and adoption into God’s own family.

Our hearts want things and want them now. The wisdom of God reminds us that he is the giver of all good things, that he’s given us the best possible thing in his Son, Jesus.

So the first hazard was the danger of robbing others. The second hazard is *the danger of rushing into a task without weighing the potential for harm*. Or in a simple word, *carelessness*, which comes from taking our eyes off the path, and fixing them so narrowly on the prize that we fail to see the hazards right under our nose. Look with me at vv. 9-11:

He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. <sup>10</sup> If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed. <sup>11</sup> If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.

We have in these verses three examples of tasks or occupations from the ancient world (and still around in the world today): quarrying stones, splitting logs, and charming snakes. And each one involves a certain level of danger or risk. The picture here is of someone jumping into a task carelessly, needlessly injuring themselves or making the work harder than it needs to be. As we see in v. 10: “If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed.” A little wisdom goes a long way in accomplishing what God gives us to do. Sometimes that means slowing down, taking time to sharpen the axe before chopping the wood. Putting on the bicycle helmet before going for a ride. Double-checking the safety on the table saw before you grab that piece of wood. Sometimes it means hurrying up; if you don’t charm the snake before he bites, it doesn’t do any good to charm it. If you don’t hop on the plane right away to visit your dying parent, you may not have the chance to say goodbye. The wise person will approach his task with the careful thought necessary to accomplish it.

In a lot of ways, this is simply common sense. It doesn’t take divine wisdom to know that it’s a good idea to check for traffic before you step into the street. But it raises the question: why is it so hard for us sometimes to listen to common sense? Sometimes it doesn’t seem that common. What is it that causes us to jump mindlessly into certain tasks?

Sometimes we’re so excited about the prize, so greedy for the results of our task, that we go at it without counting the cost. Building an addition on the house and finding out halfway through that you’ve run out of money and the bank won’t increase the loan; that could have been avoided with a little research up front. Firing off an email in our anger and destroying a relationship with it, when 30 seconds of patient reflection could have anticipated that dreadful result.

Sometimes it’s the pride that comes with experience. “I’ve done this a hundred times before.” “I’ve driven this route to work a thousand times and I’ve never seen that stop sign.” Sometimes it’s the pride that comes from presuming that we know what we’re doing. How many dads in this room have started some elaborate toy assembly project for our kids by setting aside the instructions: “I’ve got this son. Let me show you how it’s done.” And three hours later we’re

Googling how to undo what we did wrong. This kind of presumption can get us into trouble, and cause us to work a lot harder than necessary. As v. 15 puts it, “The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.”

Even though what we need here is simply a little common sense, we need the grace of God to open our eyes to that—to see our pride, our stubbornness, our inherent foolishness, to take our eyes off ourselves, and off whatever else is distracting us, and to fix them again on God, on his purposes, on his character and virtue, that we might walk with wisdom and careful patience with what he’s given us to do.

We see the third road hazard in vv. 12-14: *the danger of running our mouths* in foolishness and arrogance, which is like trying to navigate a dangerous path while staring at your own reflection in a mirror. This one gets interesting. Let’s look together at these verses:

The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.<sup>13</sup> The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness.<sup>14</sup> A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?

First we notice the obvious benefit of speaking wise words—they either win favor, or perhaps give grace, depending on how we translate it. We’ll talk more about that in a minute. But the emphasis here is on foolish speech, the danger of running our mouths, which in this passage is self-destructive, evil, and arrogant.

Look at the imagery of v. 12: “the lips of a fool consume him.” That’s a nice picture—your own mouth eating your body in self-destruction. How often do our words get us in trouble? And the more we talk the deeper a whole we seem to be digging.

Sometimes we don’t even intend for others to hear our criticisms or complaints, but somehow they catch wind, like a little birdie told them, as in v. 20: “Even in your thought, 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.” I find it incredibly ironic that the social medium, Twitter, has been the cause of personal and professional destruction for so many people. That little blue birdie has caused a lot of people grief. Politicians, Olympic athletes, and all kinds of employees have lost their jobs due to thoughtless tweets. A word to the wise: never post something on Facebook or Twitter that you’re not okay with the entire world reading, because they can.

But foolish speech is not merely self-destructive, it is destructive to others as well. They begin with foolishness and end in *evil madness*. Our words have the power to cause incredible harm. The book of James warns us that “the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. . . . For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (Jms. 3:6-8).

No one is immune from deadly and damaging speech. Paul Tripp offers a helpful diagnostic for us to think through how deadly our speech can be. He writes:

Listen to the talk that goes on in your home. How much of it is impatient and unkind? How often are words spoken out of selfishness and personal desire? How easily do outbursts of anger occur? How often do we bring up past wrongs? How do we fail to communicate hope? How do we fail to protect? How often do our words carry threats that we have ‘had it’ and

are about to quit? Stop and listen, and you will see how much we need to hold our talk to [a] standard of love, and how often the truth we profess to speak has been distorted by sin.<sup>1</sup>

Foolish talk is evil. It brings harm to others.

Moreover it is plentiful. Fools love to hear their own voices, especially when they have no clue what they're talking about. If you've ever been at a party and every time somebody tells a story or shares their thoughts on something, there's the one guy who can always one up it, who always says, "Well, actually..." or "That's nothing! Let me tell you about..." And the longer he goes on the more convinced you are he has no clue what he's talking about. "A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be" (v. 14). This is pride and arrogance, thinking more highly of ourselves than others, more highly of ourselves than God. It's like being so in love with yourself that when you drive down Winter Street, instead of looking at the road, you're staring at your own reflection in the rearview mirror. That's not going to end well.

So what do wise words look like? Again, like all wisdom, they begin with God—his character, his purposes, and more specifically, with what he's done to rescue us and change our hearts through the gospel of his Son. Words always flow from the heart; what's inside is what comes out. Wise words flow from a heart that has been transformed by Jesus. And so as we receive new life through faith in Christ, we're able to speak life-giving words to others, rather than damaging words that tear others down.

It's easy, when our eyes are on ourselves, to point out wrongs in others. When is the last time you reminded a brother or sister who they are in Jesus—that they are a child of God, whose greatest need has been satisfied in Christ, who are cleansed and clothed in the righteousness of Christ, who stand before God completely pardoned and fully accepted and utterly loved? Parents, when is the last time you told your children that you will always love them no matter what they do, in the same way that Christ loves us? Children, when is the last time you thanked your parents for all they do, and the reflection it is of your heavenly Father?

Foolish speech is a deadly obstacle. The gospel of Jesus gives us wisdom to avoid that hazard. As we are increasingly satisfied in Jesus, we're free to use our words to help others be satisfied in Jesus and make much of God, rather than using them to get others to make much of me.

So we've seen the danger of robbing others, or rushing mindlessly into tasks, or running our mouths. Finally, vv. 16-19 shows us *the danger of revelry and laziness*—of making all of life a party, which is like driving down Winter Street with your eyes fixed on the bottom of the glass. Let's look at vv. 16-19 together:

Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!<sup>17</sup>  
 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!<sup>18</sup> Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.<sup>19</sup> Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Tripp, *War of Words* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 229; cited in Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 245.

We see in these verses the foolishness of irresponsibility and self-indulgence, treating life like one big meaningless party, which is particularly problematic when it happens at the top level of leadership. Phil Ryken notes one example from European history, Charles XII:

. . . who became the king of Sweden when he was only a teenager. The wild behavior of Charles and his friends included riding on horseback through his grandmother's apartment, knocking people to the ground in the city streets, and practicing firearms by shooting out the windows of the palace. In response, the leading preachers of Stockholm all agreed to preach from Ecclesiastes 10:16 on the same Sunday, pronouncing woe on a land with a child for a king and princes that feasted in the morning.<sup>2</sup>

Of course kings are not the only ones prone to this self-centered carelessness. And when life is nothing more than a party, we find ourselves spending so much energy on being entertained that we have nothing left for the things we're supposed to do. It's hard to get out of bed and go to work with a hangover, or after spending all hours of the night playing video games or watching YouTube videos. With revelry comes laziness, the kind that puts off important things like fixing the roof so that eventually it falls in, as in v. 18, all the while justifying our self-centered behavior with the motto of v. 19, which I think the Preacher says satirically: "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything."

Again, this comes from a very small view of God and an extremely inflated view of self—maybe not so much caring what others think of you, but caring only about doing what you want and having fun. And like all foolishness, it's deadly to try to walk through life with our eyes fixed on the bottom of beer glass.

But the saddest part of this portrait is not the inherent danger, but the waste of life. You were meant for so much more. God did not create you and give you life in vain. He did not send his Son to rescue you in vain. God made us and redeems us for a purpose—for his purposes, which are so much grander, so much for satisfying, and so longer lasting than any of the small purposes we come up with for ourselves. You were created in the image of God, to know him as child knows a Father, to serve him as a beloved, loyal subject serves a worthy, just, and loving king. You were made to know and enjoy God forever, to delight in him and be satisfied in him in a way that nothing under the sun can satisfy. You were created to spread God's glory and make his name known to the ends of the earth. And despite your sin and mine, whereby we forfeited this privilege and relationship, God sent his Son Jesus to redeem us and buy us back for these purposes.

We have a responsibility before God, not to make it up to him or perform for him, but to live each day by his grace, in the power of his Holy Spirit, for his purposes. And to handle what's been entrusted to us—whether food, family, work, friendship—in accordance with his purposes—to make much of his name to the ends of the earth.

The problem in these verses is not wine, feasting, or celebration—those are all good things; in fact, Ecclesiastes has commended all of them *in their proper place* (cf. 2:24; 9:7). The problem is using these good things in an irresponsible way. Using them for our own self-focused purposes, instead of for God's, what he intended them for. Bread was not made for laughter; in v.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ryken, 247.

17 we see it's made for strength. Wine was made for celebration, not drunkenness. And the wise, responsible king or person will use these things according to their God-given purpose.

Living with wisdom opens our eyes, not just to avoid the hazards of life, but to make the most of our lives for God. Living with wisdom keeps our eyes fixed on the gospel of Jesus, the gospel that we remember and celebrate with the Lord's Table this morning.

This meal that we're about to celebrate is, somewhat ironically, a meal for fools. It's for fools who have turned their backs on God, who have taken advantage of others, who have thought too highly of themselves, who have used their words as weapons, and who have wasted what's been entrusted to them. This table is for fools such as us.

But this table is for a certain kind of fool—one who recognizes his foolishness over against the wisdom of God. One who confesses his foolishness and his utter need for Jesus.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Cor. 1:26-30)

This table is a celebration of the gospel of Jesus—that God has not left us in our foolish rebellion, but sent his Son to give his life on our behalf, to offer up his body, broken for us (as the bread reminds us), to shed his blood, poured out for us (as the cup reminds us), that we might be forgiven, cleansed, restored to right relationship with God and joyful service to him in this world.

So if Jesus Christ is your hope and you have placed your faith personally in him, then I invite you to join us in this celebration this morning. If you have not given your life to Christ, or you're not sure what that means, then I ask you to let the elements pass this morning, and instead of taking the sign, to take hold of Jesus in faith.