

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, Number 40

October 9, 2005



Wisdom or Folly: Eventually Revealed

Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour. A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left. Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool. (Ecclesiastes 10:1-3)

I have never heard a person boast about his ignorance! People tend to "put their best foot forward," or at least what they think to be their best foot. Given the time we've spent with Solomon, we may reasonably conclude that many people think themselves wise who are more comparable to the fool in Ecclesiastes than the wise man.

During an era when people did not deal as wisely with mental handicaps as in our time, I heard a story about a country store owner whose young child was mentally handicapped. One day the father had to leave the store for a couple of hours, so he left his handicapped child to watch the store alone. He cautioned the child, "If anyone comes into the store, don't say anything to them. If you do, they will find out about your problem." When the father arrived back at the store, he asked the child how things had gone. The child responded that someone had visited the store. "Did you say anything to them?" asked the father. "No, but they found out about my problem anyway," responded the child. However much a person boasts about wisdom, his conduct will reveal the fact. The obvious question surfaces; does a truly wise person boast about his wisdom? I have strong convictions about the value of education. I have lived for most of my professional career in the presence of highly educated people who dedicated their lives and careers to the field of education. During this time I have observed a significant number of people who could add any number of abbreviations to their business cards to show their various degrees and accomplishments. Some of them proved by wise and professional conduct that they had earned their degrees and demonstrated their skill with every difficult situation they encountered. Others boasted of their

degrees, but showed minimal abilities to relate to people and to understand the realities of the work they were assigned to perform. We do not reveal wisdom by our claims to it, but by our conduct and words in the trenches of life where we make daily decisions and choices. The more a person boasts about his degrees and accomplishments the more suspicious his true attainments. A true education humbles a person by exposing him/her to the world of knowledge that he/she has not mastered. A limited education inflates a person with pride, prompting them to boast about their learning. In his wisest moment Solomon didn't boast of wisdom and authority; he melted in humility under the weight of his responsibilities and viewed himself as a little child. Did not Jesus use the same analogy to describe the person who gains true stature in the kingdom of God?

An "apothecary" is an old word for a pharmacy. Imagine visiting your local pharmacy and watching as the pharmacist prepares an ointment prescribed by your dermatologist. As the pharmacist stirs and mixes the various chemicals prescribed by the physician, you notice large flies buzzing around the room, often landing in the container where he is mixing up your prescription. The pharmacist ignores them or occasionally waves his hands to move them away. When he finally hands you the container of ointment, how comfortable are you with the medication? The conflict between the man's role as an expert in medications and his oblivion to the contamination potentially injected into the drugs by the flies destroys your trust in his competence and shakes your confidence in the medication's ability to heal your problem.

This scenario depicts the problem that Solomon wants to teach us regarding the

intimate and consistent quality of wisdom in our life. Wisdom is not something that we put on and take off at will. It is not something that we exhibit when put in the spotlight by a Bible question by a friend. It is something that we either possess or not, either applying it to our daily life or living like a fool while claiming to be wise.

A person views himself/herself as wise. Frequently the self-proclaimed wise person possesses many admirable and commendable traits. At times this person may well present a convincing case for wisdom. Imagine such a person. Then in the midst of a true-to-life situation observe this person say or do something that is so out of character, so “unwise” as to shock your expectations. This scenario is precisely what Solomon has in mind with his lesson to us from the ancient pharmacy. The pharmacist holds a title and position for knowing about the world of medications, how to make them, and how to use them. However, when knowledge translates to action, he ignores the most fundamental principles of cleanliness, jeopardizing his reputation, but, more importantly, endangering his patient rather than providing the healing balm that is needed.

In a time when “right” and “left” hold toxic and divisive political and moral we need to exit our own world and visit the world in which Solomon wrote this lesson. Tom Constable takes us there.

“‘The right’ and ‘the left’ (v. 2) are not the correct way and the incorrect way. They are not the political right and left, conservatism and liberalism, either. They are the place of protection and the place of danger (cf. Ps. 16:8; 110:5; 121:5). The “road” (v. 3) is not a literal highway but the fool’s metaphorical way of life. The wise man does not quit his job when his boss gets angry with him. He maintains his composure and so gives the impression rightly or wrongly that his boss did not need to be angry.”¹

¹Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, Ec 10:2 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

D. A. Carson further clarifies the “right-left” concept.

“Since lefthandedness was linked with incompetence (see Jdg. 3:15; 20:16), to have one’s heart inclined to the right is to be upright, skilful and resourceful in one’s daily life. To have one’s heart inclined to the left is to be fumbling and incompetent at the ‘wellspring of life’ (Pr. 4:23). Such incompetence will become visible (3).”²

The third verse in our lesson takes us to the practical reality that Solomon teaches us. “*Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool.*” It is not our words that necessarily reveal whether we are wise or foolish, but our deeds. In the trenches of life wisdom will shine, while the pretense of wisdom will crack.

How do we apply this lesson to our personal life? First of all, do not put other folks under the spotlight to see if they are wise or foolish. Put yourself there! At times every one of us has miserably fallen below our desire—and perhaps our personal claim—of wisdom, saying or doing something foolish. Pride rushes in and tries to mask the failure. We are adroit at rationalizations. One point remains in the end. We viewed ourselves as being the wise pharmacist, but we ignored the “fly in the ointment” and thereby damaged our reputation and claim to wisdom. In such times the humility of true wisdom abandons rationalizations and confesses the fault. Jesus reminds us of this point in the Sermon on the Mount with the analogy of specks and beams in eyes. Will we be wise or fools?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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²D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition*, Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible commentary*. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed., Ec 10:2 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).