

The Superiority and Susceptibility of Wisdom – Ecclesiastes 9:13 -10:11

Wesley C Parker

Intro

Even if you couldn't care less about the sport of hockey, if you've been in Vancouver for any length of time you've undoubtedly said/heard someone say, "If the Canucks could just get _____ signed, they could have a genuine shot at winning the Stanley Cup." I will always be a Canucks fan – win or lose – but history/sports injury alone have proved this belief to be false again and again.

As long as I can remember, I have always been a hopeless romantic; certain that if I could just find the mythical "one" my life would be complete and we would live out our days together in blissful joy to the soundtrack of Kenny G and Phil Collins. I love my wife and being married to her has blessed me in ways too numerous to even count; but there's not a married person in here that wouldn't tell you that marriage is also *not* the key to all life's problems; that it doesn't come with its very own special set of them.

Or maybe you know the tale of Achilles – a hero of Greco-Roman mythology; son of the mortal king Peleus and the sea-goddess Thetis. Now Achilles was a man of great strength and speed; a fearless warrior who, apparently, also looked like Brad Pitt. But although he was undefeated/a great champion for the Greeks in battle, Achilles also had a fatal weakness: his mother had done everything she could to make him immortal from burning him over a fire every night and then dressing his wounds with ambrosia ointment, to (more famously) dunking him in the river Styx which was said to confer the immortality of the gods; I know we all want the best for our kids but, I dunno, it feels like that crosses the line of what's appropriate to me. The problem was, she held Achilles tightly by the ankle to dunk him in the river which left his ankle untouched by the waters. And one day near the end of the Trojan war, a young man named Paris – who was not a brave warrior at all – shot an arrow at Achilles which (the legend says) was guided by the god Apollo himself to the one place he knew Achilles was vulnerable; striking him in the ankle and killing this otherwise undefeatable opponent on the spot.

We have just a few weeks left in our series through the book of Ecclesiastes called **A Chasing After the Wind**. And if you've been with us for any number of weeks you'll know that Solomon - who the bible tells us was given his own super power/divine gift of God-like wisdom so that he was said to be wiser than anyone who ever lived before/after him - has had a great deal to say about wisdom. Again and again in the examination of his thesis that everything under the sun is *hebel*/like a mist/vapor, Solomon has still held up wisdom as being superior to all other things; he's told us that it's like an inheritance/shelter; that it preserves the life of its possessor and (as we'll see in our passage today) that it is superior to strength and weapons of war. But above all other things, what Solomon has told us repeatedly, is that wisdom (as we can know it) is superior to folly; that wisdom is always going to be superior to foolishness in our days under the sun. And yet, for all the strength and protection wisdom offers, Solomon has also been careful to point out that it still has limitations. And, ironically, what he wants to help



us see today is that although wisdom *is* superior to folly, folly is still the Achilles' heel of wisdom; that all the benefits of wisdom are still susceptible to even the smallest/momentary prick of folly's arrow.

Which, if you think about it, is something incredibly important for all of us to hear; b/c – as individuals as well as humanity as a whole – isn't every single one of us looking for that one, undefeatable champion that we can rely on to bring us meaning, value and purpose in life? That position/relationship, that status/certain number on our bank account statement that we believe, "If I just had *that*, I'd be protected from anything else that life could throw at me." And the help that Solomon is trying to give us here, and - really - throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, is that at the end of his lifetime of investigation, what he's come to discover is that – under the sun – that champion does not exist. And Solomon would save us from taking one more step down that dead-end path/spending one more day trusting in the protection of that champion with a fatal flaw.

And, as it relates to trusting in wisdom as our champion, Solomon is going to show us two things in our passage today. He's going to show us that **Wisdom is superior to strength** but also that **Wisdom is susceptible to folly (from without and within) (x2)**.

So, if you've closed your bibles, please open them again to Ecclesiastes 9:13 and follow along with me as we look at the strength and susceptibility of wisdom.

So, let's look first of all at how:

1. Wisdom is superior to strength - 9:13- 18a; 10:4, 10-11

If you look with me back to the start of our passage in **9:13** Solomon begins with something of a parable about the superiority of wisdom; a story that he says greatly impressed him. Look with me at **vs. 14** Solomon writes (**READ vs. 14-15a**). Now, in one sense, this parable is simply repeating what we looked at last week in **9:11**, but in story form; an example of the fact that the battle is *not* always to the strong and favor does *not* always come for the learned. For if you look at the simple details of the story, don't they show **a**) a victory in battle that does *not* go to the side you'd expect and **b**) the honor/favor that *should* go to this wise man who saved the city *not* being given?

But beyond a simple demonstration of how "time and chance happen to them all", I think what Solomon is highlighting here in particular is the way that wisdom is this superior thing that wins the day; superior even to the strength/military prowess of this formidable attacking army. And, given the outcome he sees wisdom bringing about to this otherwise unwinnable day, it's little wonder why in **vs. 16** Solomon concludes, (**READ vs. 16a**); or in **vs. 18** (**READ vs. 18a**), even *if* that wisdom is not given the proper credit it deserves.



Look ahead with me now to **10:4** – Solomon writes (**READ 10:4**) So here, Solomon is still showing how wisdom is superior to strength, only now – instead of talking about how wisdom is superior to the strength of an attacking army – he’s showing us how wisdom is superior to the strength of an angry ruler/boss. Now, he seems to be assuming a wrong/mistaken response from this person in authority over you, by telling us that our wise response can, “lay great errors to rest.” But do you know what I think he’s saying here? In the business world, I think he’s saying: If your boss lets into you and your team b/c your spending is over budget, maybe don’t get indignant, quit your job and storm out of the board room; maybe instead you absorb a little of that, and then calmly explain how the extra spending from your team was, actually, about gaining client retention that’s now going to benefit the company for years to come. If you just storm out, you lose that opportunity. In your home life: If your dad blows his top b/c you’re coming in three hours after your curfew, maybe not responding with, “Ugh!!!” and then storming off to your bedroom and slamming the door, but – instead – calmly expressing your understanding for his anger and your desire to explain the reason for your lateness *and* how it’s completely reasonable to believe that in 2018 not a single one of your friends had a cell phone you could’ve used to call.

I love **Derek Kidner’s** commentary on this verse, he writes, “*What we are invited to notice is the rather absurd human phenomenon called ‘the huff.’ If one can recognize its symptoms, one will be saved some self-inflicted damage – for while it may feel magnificent to ‘resign your post’, ostensibly on principle but actually in a fit of pride, it is in fact less impressive and much more immature than it feels.*”

Earlier in the book of **Proverbs 15:1** Solomon said it this way, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” And the wisdom of staying present, and calmly responding in the face of anger ,provides you with an opportunity both for anger to be overcome and for error to be corrected; an opportunity that the ‘huff’ will only see wasted.

So Solomon has shown us how wisdom is superior to the strength of an attacking army as well as the strength of an angry boss. If you look down to **vss. 10-11** we see how wisdom is also superior to the strength of natural/everyday obstacles that we face. He writes (**READ vs. 10-11**) Now this much more practical, pragmatic of advice, but that doesn’t make it any less true. This is on the level of sage dad-advice, “Use the right tool for the job.” “Work smarter, nor harder.” And it’s also why I think it’s safe to assume you will *never* see a competition in one of those lumberjack shows where they see who can bash through a log the quickest with a sledge hammer or an American Idol type competition for novice snake charmers. B/c you may be strong enough to accomplish those feats that way, but it doesn’t gain you anything; and even the simplest person in the audience knows that there are wiser ways to accomplish them.

App

In the end, I think what Solomon is getting at here with each of these examples is he’s asking us - whenever we’re confronted with the strength of others - to honestly ask ourselves the question, “What is my goal here? What do I actually hope to see as the outcome?” B/c he’s clearly demonstrated how wisdom *is* superior to strength in every case. But if your goal is



honestly to act/speak/serve in a way that's going to be of greatest benefit to everyone, regardless of who gets the credit, that's going to be received very differently/achieve a far greater result in the end than if your goal is, primarily, just to show people how wise/principled/strong *you* are.

Think of the poor man in the first example: his wisdom was superior to the strength of an entire army and he saved the city from certain destruction, but 3 weeks later nobody even remembered who he was anymore.

In the NT, in **Matthew 6**, Jesus talks about giving and serving in ways that are not seen/rewarded by men *so that* the One – that is God – who sees what is done in secret can truly reward us. I think as individuals as well as a church family collectively – particularly as we think about ways to engage our neighbours and see our city and world renewed - we need to ask ourselves, “Is it enough to know that God sees and will reward your calm response to anger, even if no one else does?” “Is it enough for your quiet words to help someone even if no one knows exactly where they came from?” “Is it enough to serve our neighbourhood/city in wise ways that help them to flourish, even if our church name is never remembered/shows up in the newspaper, knowing that God sees and will reward?” B/c if the goal is growing the Kingdom of God then the only recognition that matters is His; but if the goal is growing the kingdom of Dunbar Heights/our own personal kingdoms, then I think no matter how wise the idea is, it rolls over from being wisdom into folly.

Which is a helpful way to transition to the next thing Solomon wants to show us, which is:

2. Wisdom is susceptible to folly (from without and within) – 9:17-18; 10:1-3, 5-9

Look with me at **vss. 17-18** once again; and we'll read it all this time. Solomon writes (**READ vss. 17-18**) “one sinner destroys much good.” Look at the way he illustrates this in **10:1 (READ 10:1)** The origin of the picture is clear enough: a perfume/ointment maker is making up a batch of product and, through the day, small flies land in the mixture and die; causing both the smell and the appearance of the perfume to go rancid. My guess is you're probably not gonna sell a lot of Channel No. 5 with dead flies floating the bottle.

And the illustration is powerful when applied to wisdom and folly: thinking about how even the smallest action or word can take wisest/trupest of actions and ruin them. A culturally insensitive action by one of your team members during a short-term missions trip; a company with a long history of community support has a quote from one of its executives taken out-of-context and it goes viral. In fact, particularly in our day and age of global connectedness on such an extreme level through social media, the damage from even the smallest of mistakes can be devastating.



Derek Kidner, again, commenting on this verse says, *“It puts into a vividly unpleasant form the principle on which the previous chapter ended: that it takes far less to ruin something than to create it.”*

But, for me, that’s the thing that’s most terrifying of all to consider here: for, what Solomon is saying is that for all of wisdom’s superiority over all these other things mentioned here and elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, the second half of **9:18b** and **10:1b** both clearly say that even a little bit of folly/even one sinner *still* has the power to ability to render it meaningless.

And it’s never this simple – few things in life truly are – but I think, broadly speaking, we can break down what Solomon says about the *way* wisdom under the sun is susceptible/vulnerable to folly, into two categories: Solomon shows how wisdom is susceptible to folly from without/outside of ourselves, as well as how wisdom is susceptible to folly from within.

I think we see Solomon describing folly’s influence from without/external to us in **vss. 5-7** look with me there. Solomon writes (**READ vss. 5-7**). Now this is interesting b/c – if you were here last week - Solomon was saying that the evil he saw under sun in **9:3** as it related to death was that this same destiny (death) came upon all/the bad *and* the good. Now here, as it relates to wisdom, he says the evil he’s seen under the sun is that fools are put in high places of leadership and influence; the imagery of **vs. 7** in particular is quite striking, stating (**READ vs.7**); striking b/c – in today’s world – this would be equivalent to Queen Elizabeth walking behind the horses in a parade with a boom and a dust-bin while the MI5 secret service guy sits in the armored car waving politely.

Now, it would be all too easy here to pick at the low-hanging political fruit when it comes to Solomon’s description of fools being in positions of power/influence. I appreciated author **Philip Ryken’s** restraint when, in his own commentary on Ecclesiastes, he says of **vss. 6 – 7** *“Whenever we see things turned upside down – whenever a society celebrates immorality, perpetuates wrongful violence, punishes righteousness, denies the authority of God, or persecutes His people – we may be sure that folly is in control.”*

But I think where you see this kind of external influence of folly on wisdom at a societal level today is where we no longer look to sociologist/economists to help us understand/interpret the issues of our day, we interview celebrities to tell us what we should think instead; the election of a political candidate is no longer solely determined by their stance on/ability to defend on certain issues, but also on how many Facebook/Instagram followers they have.

If you want a biblical example of external folly being the undoing of wisdom, you need look no further than Moses leading the people of Israel through the wilderness. Where, after 40 years of being daily worn down/beaten up by their endless/faithless/bickering folly, even Moses – the man who is said to have spoke with God, face to face, as a friend – breaks down and loses his temper and – in that one moment – ruins a 40 years of faithfulness to God and is denied entry into the Promised Land.

If you look at **vss. 8-9** now, I think here we see Solomon describing something of folly’s influence from within. He writes (**READ vss. 8-9**). Now, yes, these are all relatively everyday

examples; the kind of workplace injuries that WorkSafe BC handles on a daily basis. But I think the point Solomon is trying to make with these examples is that human error/momentary carelessness/etc. when performing a task we've done 1000 times can *also* be that one moment of folly that destroys an otherwise injury-free career up until that point. How many times in your own life have you heard about the man/woman who was so experienced in their trade/skill they figured this one time they could forego safety gear/best practices and then *that* was when "time and chance" happened to them?

A biblical example of folly within outweighing wisdom in the moment could be someone like Isaac's eldest son Esau. He had the place of honor/privilege in the family as the first-born son, and yet – in a moment of hunger/weakness – he sold away his birthright to his younger brother Jacob for nothing more than a bowl of stew.

App

Here's the point I see Solomon getting at here as it relates to folly's ability -whether external or internal - to still ruin/outweigh wisdom, superior a pursuit as it is: the past may be a good indicator of future performance, but it's not the *only* indicator. And what can end up happening (regardless of the environment we're talking about) is that people can become simultaneously over-confident *and* complacent when it comes to vigilance/consistency and – as a result – they can give in to folly's influence unsuspectingly; blowing up their lives/families/careers.

Philip Ryken states the fundamental problem well, regardless of whether or not the influence of folly is external or internal. He writes, "*Most Christians can distinguish good from evil. We know that some things are morally right, while others are morally wrong. So we try to do the right things instead of the wrong things. This kind of thinking is fine, as far as it goes. The trouble, however, is that some of the most important choices in life are not between good and evil, but between wisdom and folly.*"

I don't get nervous *at all* when another pastor comes to me and asks me to pray that God would protect them from "besetting sins"/folly that would destroy their family/ministry; I get nervous around pastors who *never* ask me to pray for that, or – worse - who *assumes* that b/c they have a past pattern of faithfulness/position, that that somehow protects them from being fooled tomorrow. I'm not annoyed by a professional who wants to instruct me about the essential safety practices of their profession, I'm worried/frightened by the man/woman who wants to take my kid out for a ride who says, "Don't worry; I've been doing this for years!"

The past is not always a sufficient predictor of what will happen tomorrow; and the humble/vigilant among us will recognize that and continue to press the need for safety/protection/accountability long after the "requirement" for it has passed.



Conclusion

It shouldn't be lost on us, as we close this morning, that even Solomon himself – the wisest man who ever lived – is *still* speaking from personal experience when he warns us about the dangers of permitting the smallest concession/relaxing at the steering wheel of faithfulness/accountability. For, maybe you know even from his own life, how his concession regarding his wives/concubines along with the worship of their foreign gods, undoubtedly became the “flies in the perfume” of his own life before God, as well as the Achilles' heel that finally removed him from the throne and saw the kingdom of Israel broken in two.

Now, everybody relax, Solomon's call here is not a call to perfection/to follow God perfectly so that we never fall victim to folly's influence; none of us could live up to that call living out our days under the sun, and Solomon himself didn't live up to that. But it absolutely *is* a call to guard ourselves against the influence of folly in our lives – both external and internal – as well as a call to recognize the limitations of wisdom as we can know it under the sun as a result of folly's external/internal influence.

Our *only* hope for enjoying the superior gain of wisdom in this life is, **firstly** – just as we saw last week – in submitting our lives to the One who holds all of our times in His hands; they may appear to be guided by nothing more than “time and chance” but God's word is clear: He works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). And, **secondly**, by acknowledging the susceptibility that all of us *still* have to folly; that *no* amount of past faithfulness guarantees a future imperviousness to folly's touch.

We have but one Champion in whom we can boast in and on whom we can rely to secure both our present faithfulness to God as well as our future acceptance/welcoming by the Father when our life under the sun comes to an end, and it is *not* wisdom or anything else we might seek/attain on our own.

It is God Himself - revealed to us in the Person of Jesus – who alone is our Champion and our Hope; the One whom the apostle Paul tells us, “has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore,” Paul exhorts us, “as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”

Let's pray.