

Lose Your Fool

Ecclesiastes 10:2-20 November 20, 2024

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Those are the closing lines from Robert Frost's famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*. In pop culture it is an anthem of individuality and non-conformity - a charge to go your own way - knowing that your courage will lead you on to great adventure.

The thing is, that's *not* why Frost wrote the poem. He wrote it as a *joke*. You see, Bob often took walks with friend and fellow poet Edward Thomas. But Ed always struggled to decide which way to go. After finally choosing a path, he would predictably lament that they hadn't gone the other way.

The trouble was, *no one got the joke!* Frost later wrote to Edward Thomas complaining that after reading his poem to a group of college students, it was "taken pretty seriously...despite doing my best to make it obvious by my manner that I was fooling."¹

A closer look at *The Road Not Taken* reveals that both paths are equally fair, both had worn the same, both are, in fact, uniformly untraveled. In the poem, the choice of one over the other comes down simply to the internal impulse of the moment.

Tonight, we stand with the Teacher at the head of two paths. As we set out he shares some poetic proverbs. There's a bit of silliness in his illustrations, but make no mistake: The choice before us is extremely serious. One path leads to success in all the ways that matter, the other to ruin.

Ecclesiastes 10:2 - ²A wise person's heart goes to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.

In the Bible, *right* symbolically refers to prosperity in the whole of life.² It refers to the Godly way. It speaks of strength.³ The *left* refers to the way of disaster. Man's way. The way of weakness. This isn't about a walk in the woods. This is about the lives we're living. The direction we're headed in.

This is *not* like Robert Frost's choice where both paths are essentially the same. *These* two paths are going in totally opposite directions. And *you* are on one of these paths right now.

Even if you feel like your life isn't going anywhere, or that you haven't made any major life decisions recently, you *are* in transit. Your life *is* developing according to the choices you make.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/89511/robert-frost-the-road-not-taken>

² Roland Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23a: Ecclesiastes*

³ Frank Gaebel, Willem VanGemern, Allen Ross, J. Stafford Wright, and Dennis Kinlaw. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

Notice that for both the wise *and* the fool, it is the *heart* that drives them on. What does our culture always say? “*Follow your heart!*” The problem is that *our* hearts are desperately wicked - more deceitful than anything else.⁴ The Proverbs tells us that foolishness is bound to our hearts.⁵ So, when we follow our hearts, we’re going to go to the left into folly.

We need to be cured of our heart disease. That’s why Christ gives us a *new* heart. Meaning a heart that’s truly alive, that’s filled with *God’s* wisdom and desires. A heart whose gravitational pull is toward this rightward path.⁶

So, as we read this text, thinking about these two paths, the question is: Am I living wisely or foolishly?⁷ We shouldn’t assume we’re never the fool in these images we see along the way.

Ecclesiastes 10:3 - ³Even when the fool walks along the road, his heart lacks sense, and he shows everyone he is a fool.

Dan Allender writes, “[*the fool*] will follow a path that seems to be right, even when the blacktop gives way to gravel and gravel to dirt and dirt to rocks and debris.”⁸ You see, he *thinks* he has gone the right way, just as Lot did when he chose the plains of Sodom. It *looked* so promising. Look at the wealth out there. Look at the power he’d gain and the luxury and the worldly delights. He was so quick to leave the presence of the Living God for some lush grass. But even as the ground of Sodom crumbled beneath his feet, he *still* thought his way was the best way.

As he walks, the fool in verse 3 keeps telling people that *they’re* the dummies.⁹ But his heart has tricked him. Now, we might laugh at this foolish figure strutting down his path, but what happens when *powerful* fools cross *our* path? Look at verse 4.

Ecclesiastes 10:4 - ⁴If the ruler’s anger rises against you, don’t leave your post, for calmness puts great offenses to rest.

Maybe the “ruler” here, this person in authority over you, is a fool - they’re mad over something they shouldn’t be. *Or*, maybe *you* did something foolish and are getting tuned up for it. After all, we still make foolish mistakes from time to time.

Either way, when the ruler blows up in our face, what should we do? The Teacher is very candid: Don’t be so easily offended. Don’t resign your post in a huff.¹⁰ Your response shouldn’t be “I don’t have to sit here and be talked to like that.” Instead, the *wise* thing to do is to respond calmly. Philip

⁴ Jeremiah 17:9

⁵ Proverbs 22:15

⁶ EBC

⁷ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

⁸ Dan Allender, Tremper Longman *Bold Love*

⁹ WBC

¹⁰ Derek Kidner *A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance: The Message Of Ecclesiastes*

Ryken writes, “*This is the Biblical way to deal with fools—not by sharing in their folly but by living out the character of Christ.*”¹¹

The problem is, we don’t want to suffer fools. We want to dismiss them. But we have a higher calling to live like Christ. And, thank God that *He* suffers fools, because that’s all of us, right?

Ecclesiastes 10:5-7 - ⁵There is an evil I have seen under the sun, an error proceeding from the presence of the ruler: ⁶The fool is appointed to great heights, but the rich remain in lowly positions. ⁷I have seen slaves on horses, but princes walking on the ground like slaves.

The Teacher isn’t being an elitist snob. He’s pointing out that things are all mixed up in our world. A powerful king might be infected by fool-heartedness while people who *should* be leaders are relegated to positions far below their abilities.

One example here is that you have an inexperienced house servant leading the army while the battle-tested field commander is mixed in with the infantry.¹²

Now, as people on God’s path, as people who have *real* wisdom, we not only look at the world and understand how things could be better, but in Christ we actually transcend conventional wisdom and relate to the world according to what *Christ* thinks *should* be. Where the greatest among us should be the servant of all. Where life is not about aggrandizing ourselves, but magnifying the Messiah. Where wealth and social status and position aren’t the end goals of our lives, but the glory of God and the furtherance of *His* Kingdom, rather than our own.

Ecclesiastes 10:8 - ⁸The one who digs a pit may fall into it, and the one who breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.

There are different ways we could look at these proverbs. One is to recognize that, because of sin, the world is now an inherently dangerous place. A world of thorns. There are occupational hazards. Being wise means being careful when necessary, which might help us avoid some of those hazards.

Or, he could be referring to fools being stupid. Did you hear about the amateur treasure hunter in Brazil who dug a 130 foot hole in his kitchen floor? He dreamed there was gold down there and started digging. One day in his kitchen, he lost balance and fell 12 stories to his death.¹³ That’s not Adam’s fault, that’s *your* fault. There’s a difference between futility and stupid foolishness.

A third way of looking at this proverb is that you reap-what-you-sow. The sinner who digs a pit for an innocent person will fall into it himself in the end.

¹¹ Ryken

¹² David Hubbard *The Communicator’s Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*

¹³ <https://notthebee.com/article/amateur-treasure-hunter-falls-to-death-in-insanely-deep-pit-he-dug-in-his-own-kitchen>

No matter which way we look at it, the point is we should use our God-given minds to think about the choices we're making. Even though we can't predict the future, we can do the math and make some forecasts. We should look a little bit ahead in life and take wise steps when possible.¹⁴

Ecclesiastes 10:9 - ⁹The one who quarries stones may be hurt by them; the one who splits logs may be endangered by them.

Sometimes accidents happen. The fallen world is in decay. That doesn't mean we give up on doing life. Look at the elements here: Wood and stones. Basic elements for human activity. We have to accept risk to live life. Withdrawing from life is a waste of life.

Beyond the literal aspect, let's think about it this way: There are things we *need* to do that are necessary for a healthy life. Things like being regularly connected to a local church. We go to the New Testament and it's clear: We *need* this.

Yet there are many Christians who say, "Well, I love Jesus, but I've been hurt by 'the Church,' so I don't go anymore." Ok. I get it. But that attitude is just wrong. Yes, there are some risks when we connect our lives to other people. We're all fools at heart. We all make mistakes. Sometimes we hurt one another. But quitting the quarry doesn't lead you to a healthy spiritual life. It robs you of the basic elements you need for spiritual life. And remember, even *great* offenses can be put to rest if we fear God and walk in His wisdom. So, we can't be so afraid of the risks of life that we refuse to live these lives God has given us. We simply need to be more wise and less impulsive.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 - ¹⁰If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen its edge, then one must exert more strength; however, the advantage of wisdom is that it brings success.

Wisdom can make life easier. On the flip side, foolishness makes life needlessly difficult. Sharpen your ax. Hone your skills. Improve your understanding. Learn from others. Get wisdom and apply it.

Ecclesiastes 10:11 - ¹¹If the snake bites before it is charmed, then there is no advantage for the charmer.

In certain cases, wisdom might actually save your life! There are a couple of ideas here. The first is about using wisdom to prioritize what needs doing now. If there's a snake at your feet about to bite you and your shoes are untied, prioritize the snake. For you procrastinators out there, just be careful about what you put off to do tomorrow. Don't pretend it doesn't cost you something.

But also consider this: The Teacher always wants to keep death in our minds. Death is coming to bite you. A viper slithering your way. What will you do about that? Do you have the anti-venom you need? Even better, have you found the Person Who takes the *teeth* out of death?

¹⁴ Kidner

Ecclesiastes 10:12 - ¹²The words from the mouth of a wise person are gracious, but the lips of a fool consume him.

At this point, I know it's easy for me to say, "Well, I'm not the fool in this passage, so I'm good." But let's remember the many warnings we receive as *Believers* in the New Testament about our words. James, in particular, really hammered home this idea about our words. Because, he said, *none* of us have fully tamed our tongues. We need these reminders because, as James says, "We all stumble in many ways." In *particular* with the things we say.¹⁵ We can diagnose our heart health by looking at our words.

As wise people, walking God's path, our words should fall into the category of *grace*. We're saved by grace, we should *speak* with grace. But again, remember the context: We're walking through life in this fallen world, going God's way but dealing with the fools around us. We have to interact with them. We have to speak with them. The calling of God is that we speak with *undeserved* favor toward people. Obviously that doesn't mean we never deal with problems or bring up mistakes, but let's be less quick with the phrase, "I want to speak with your manager!" Grace is the way.

Ecclesiastes 10:13 - ¹³The beginning of the words from his mouth is folly, but the end of his speaking is evil madness;

Words matter. Look at what the words of a fool do in this verse. He may start by saying, "I'm just foolin'," but before he knows it they've born the fruit of raving wickedness. So, seeing the impact of the fool's words, it should cause us to measure our own. Because words can destroy lives. They can destroy relationships. They can destroy churches and institutions and industries.

The answer is not to come up with a list of words that make us 'good.' The answer is proper *heart health*. When our *hearts* are in proper shape, we're able to speak as Paul commanded:

Colossians 4:6 - ⁶Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.

Ecclesiastes 10:14 - ¹⁴yet the fool multiplies words. No one knows what will happen, and who can tell anyone what will happen after him?

The fool has no idea where he's headed, but he's sure he knows the way. Be careful of people who come to you as if they're an expert when they've never been where they're telling you to go.

Ecclesiastes 10:15 - ¹⁵The struggles of fools weary them, for they don't know how to go to the city.

¹⁵ James 3:2

As one commentator puts it: The fool would get lost if you put him on an escalator.¹⁶ That's a silly image, but some people stumble through life that way because they have no direction. They're driven on by their urges, by temptations, by fallen, conventional, human wisdom. Their lives are built on sand. There they are, at the bottom of a pit they've fallen into, holding a dull ax with a bunch of snake bites, shouting up at you that *they'll tell you how it really is!*

The thing is, in this world, it might be a *king* down there in the pit. He might have beautiful royal robes on. He might have all his court attendants down there with him. But folly is still folly.

Ecclesiastes 10:16 - ¹⁶Woe to you, land, when your king is a youth and your princes feast in the morning.

The word doesn't only mean a very young king. It can also mean a man-child.

What about all those other times when the Teacher told us to enjoy feasting? Yes, we're called to enjoy the lives we've been given. But this is a heart issue. Instead of waking up each day to lead his people and improve his society, this fellow wakes up and starts to party.¹⁷ His life is about selfish pleasure at the *expense* of the people around him. Think of King Belshazzar in Daniel 5.

Ecclesiastes 10:17 - ¹⁷Blessed are you, land, when your king is a son of nobles and your princes feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness.

The *feasting* isn't the problem - it's the heart behind it. Here's a king who is thinking about how to lead, how to protect his people, how to improve his nation, who knows that he needs personal strength to do those things.

By the way - 'noble' here isn't used because the Teacher is a classist. It refers to a person of high moral character.¹⁸

Now, we're not kings or queens. But there is still an application for us: We have a spiritual and societal duty to *grow up*. To mature. What did Paul say? "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things."¹⁹

We're to grow up as we walk with the Lord - not remain childish. We're to exercise self-control and thoughtfulness and selflessness and moderation. Peaceful hearts, not constantly offended.

Ecclesiastes 10:18 - ¹⁸Because of laziness the roof caves in, and because of negligent hands the house leaks.

¹⁶ Kidner

¹⁷ Ryken

¹⁸ Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:11

The Teacher has spent a lot of chapters talking about our *hevel* world, but don't blame this on *hevel*. This is just foolishness causing problems.

Ecclesiastes 10:19 - ¹⁹A feast is prepared for laughter, and wine makes life happy, and money is the answer for everything.

Instead of being wise, instead of maintaining the roof, the fool spends all his money on a party. And then when the drips start leaking in, they sing verse 19, which some scholars think may have been a drinking song at the time.²⁰ They say, "Just throw more money at it." Our government does this sometimes. But do the problems go away? Not without wisdom.

Yes, money is useful, but eventually it dries up. And if it's wasted and lost and the leak isn't fixed, then we've got real problems. The answer is to walk in wisdom rather than folly.

Ecclesiastes 10:20 - ²⁰Do not curse the king even in your thoughts, and do not curse a rich person even in your bedroom, for a bird of the sky may carry the message, and a winged creature may report the matter.

No sorcery happening here. Has anyone ever come up to you and said, "A little bird told me..."? This is a closing reminder that wise living demands wise speaking. Be careful, especially when you *are* using sharper words. "Well, *this* king deserves it!" Maybe. But we still have a God-given duty to respect authority.²¹ And we need to be honest about the fact that the words we speak are seeds being planted in our relationships *and* in our own hearts. Seeds that bear fruit.

Two paths diverge before us: The foolish and the wise. We're called to this *other* way. Calmness, not cursing. Grace, not griping. Thoughtfulness, not impulsiveness. A way of life that is *different* than what the world does. A way that leads to rest, not ruin. Fruitfulness, not futility. Destination, not disaster. As we walk it, our lives will benefit *and* the lives around us will benefit. But most importantly, we'll be headed in a true direction, to the right destination, fulfilled along the way.

²⁰ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

²¹ EBC