

Wisdom or Folly: Eventually Revealed

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Dear Friends,

During my formal education, I encountered a poem "Ode to a Louse" by Robert Burns. The poet sits in church behind one of the proudest and best dressed women in the congregation. She has a highly inflated view of herself. As he sits in the church behind her, his attention turns from the sermon to the woman's hair and hat. He is amazed to see a tiny louse surface and crawl around her head. He is amused at the incredible difference between this woman's inflated opinion of herself and the way he thinks of her as he watches this little bug crawling around her head. The closing verse of the poem reads

"O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!"

Loosely translated into our contemporary language, the poem would read as follows:

"Oh would some Power the gift give us
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress and gait would leave us,
And even devotion!"

Ah, my friends, how often do we allow that subtle—and at times not so subtle—sin of pride to invade our thoughts and conduct. The simple act of seeing ourselves through the eyes of others could serve such a delightful benefit to our sinful pride! Whether in ministry or in other Christian service and conduct, the profession of faith in Christ is divinely ordered to force us to abandon pride that promotes self-first attitudes and actions in favor of service to God and to others. We, like the proud woman with the louse in her hair, even pretend "devotion" to God in our pride. But godly devotion does not focus on ourselves and how we appear in the mirror of pride, but rather on God and our service to Him through our service to His people. That same deceptive pride displayed by the woman in Burns' poem, or by Solomon in the ancient pharmacy, may well be the Christian's greatest single hindrance to a truly Biblical life of service to others rather than attainment for self. When Paul wrote Timothy regarding the qualifications for church leadership, either as minister or deacon, he started the lesson by a startling observation. The man who should be considered for these positions "desireth a good work." The word "work" is central to qualifications for any functional position of service, ministry, or value in God's kingdom. The person who desires the office for prestige, authority, leadership, or other personal motives should not be remotely considered for it at all. Solomon's lesson reminds us that eventually our conduct will reveal our true motives and actions. Solomon's lesson reminds us of consistency in our conduct. If we wish to live according to God's wisdom, we must strive to do so all the time, under all circumstances, even the most difficult. Our pride could lead us to read this lesson and think of one or more people whom we have known who fit Solomon's (and perhaps Burns') description of the fool who considers himself/herself to be wise. The greater lesson, however, requires us to hold the mirror of

Scripture in front of our own faces and look at ourselves. In Burns' poem the proud woman spent much time that morning looking in the mirror of pride, arranging every item of clothing and makeup so as to contribute to her self-image of superiority and self-proclaimed perfection. Burns silently chuckles to himself as he discovers the lowly louse making himself at home in this proud woman's hair. Ah, when we look into the mirror of Scripture, let us ensure that pride has been sent away, and that we are looking first and foremost, for the image of our Lord Jesus Christ in that mirror. As we see His image, we see—for the first time—clearly our own true persons and the many areas where our image does not mesh with His. Rather than fostering pride, the "look in the mirror" of Scripture should enlighten us in terms of those "secret sins," even that little annoying ethical "louse" that enjoys himself in our "head." May we live worthy of the position that we claim in Christ, Joe Holder

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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. (Ec 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' ([Ec 10:2](#)) 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" ([Ec 10:3](#)) 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] **D. A. Carson further clarifies the "right-left" concept.** "Since lefthandedness was linked with incompetence (see [Jg 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. **H**ow 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?

Elder Joe Holder