

Ecclesiastes 10:5-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-10/ecclesiastes-105-11/>

Solomon sees evidence of folly in society and warns against reacting to the mystery of life (hebel) with apathy, evil, or injustice. Wisdom is the true path to success.

Now Solomon addresses a kind of *evil under the sun* that has broad impact. This *evil* is like an *error which goes forth from a ruler*. When a *ruler* makes an *error*, it is going to adversely affect everyone in the kingdom. So these instances of *evil* are going to be events that cause a broad negative impact.

The first instance of an *evil* that will have broad impact is when *folly is exalted while the rich are put in humble places*. The *evil* here seems to be that those who are accomplished, the *rich*, are not being esteemed, but *folly* is. When a society begins to honor *folly* over those who are well accomplished, it is an *evil* that will corrupt the entire society.

The Bible condemns gaining riches improperly (through corruption or injustice). But it positively portrays the honest gaining of wealth. Wealth can indicate that the rich man made wise choices, something that is both honorable and desirable. The activities that lead to the gaining of wealth such as growing a herd or increasing crop production creates employment and an abundance of goods for the community's prosperity. When this kind of industry is dishonored, and instead *folly* is celebrated, it is a great evil that will pollute the entire society.

The New Testament warns against the love of money and advocates that Jesus' followers put the kingdom of God first above all else ([Matthew 6:33](#)). It does not ban wealth but rather directs those with means to enjoy their wealth while being generous in giving ([1 Timothy 6:17-19](#)). Jesus loved the rich young ruler ([Mark 10:21](#)) and did not express doubt that the young man was rigorous in following the Law and practicing righteousness. But Jesus told the young man he lacked one thing, to sell all and follow Jesus. The primary principle of discipleship is that everything is to be held in stewardship and service to God. (See commentary on [Ecclesiastes 5:13-17](#) for more on this topic).

Solomon makes another point in the following verse about *slaves* and *princes*. He says he has seen *slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land*.

What might this mean in the context of an *evil* that affects an entire society? Given that Solomon had diplomatic relations far and wide, it seems likely he is drawing on his experience observing different kingdoms. In a prosperous kingdom, a *slave* might ride a horse, since *riding on horses* in a prosperous kingdom would not be a privilege but a means of transportation or industry. But in a poor kingdom, a horse might be a luxury. And in a very poor kingdom perhaps a horse is altogether unaffordable, which is why the *princes* in this poor kingdom might walk *on the land like slaves*.

It seems reasonable that this observation is connected to Solomon's prior description of an *evil* where *folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places*. In a community where achievement is dishonored or wealth is taken from those with industry, and given by the authority to those whom he favors, *folly* is honored. It is *folly* to think people will work without incentives to do so. The predictable result is poverty. Eventually there will be no more wealth to consume and even the *princes* will walk instead of ride.

It seems clear that Solomon thinks wisdom will lead to industry and industry to wealth. But now Solomon gives four situations where industry can lead to calamity. He *who digs a pit, breaks through a wall, quarries stones, or splits logs* is doing so in order to accomplish something that will bring gain. Digging a *pit* might apply to a water well or perhaps part of a house construction project. Breaking through a *wall* might be part of a remodeling project or perhaps part of a conquest. The quarrying of *stones* provides building materials. And splitting *logs* can provide firewood or building material.

This is a broad principle that applies to everything *under the sun*, namely that the application of industry always comes with risk. Every decision in life involves tradeoffs. Such risks are unavoidable, even if life is pursued with wisdom and industry. However, these risks can be weighed and mitigated with proper planning and preparation.

This is the point of the fifth activity, *sharpening the edge of a dull axe* so as to maximize the tool's effectiveness and minimize the potential for loss. A sharp *axe* also minimizes the effort expended to accomplish the desired goal, which increases productivity. However, the time spent *sharpening* is time that cannot be used to chop. A wisdom principle that can be taken from this is that

a proper amount of planning and preparation can both minimize risks and increase productivity.

Solomon turns to a somewhat extreme example to further cement the need for proper planning and preparation. He notes that *if the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer*. In this example, a snake *charmer* has secured his cobra but apparently didn't invest in training the snake before putting him into service. So instead of gaining a profit, he got bit. This is also a universal principle; *profit* requires ample investment. Those who seek shortcuts to avoid the necessary investment are going to get the rewards of *folly*.

Biblical Text:

⁵There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler—⁶folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places.⁷I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land.⁸He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall.⁹He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them.¹⁰If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. ¹¹If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer.