

Sermon 65, The Flush Fool's Fatuous Fortress, Proverbs 18:1-11

Proposition: The talkative fool destroys himself and his community. Wealth can't protect him, but Yahweh can protect His people from him.

- I. The Wordy Fool: Character and Destiny, vv. 1-9
 - A. Three Types of Fool, vv. 1-3
 - 1. The Loner, v. 1
 - 2. The Opinionated, v. 2
 - 3. The Outcast, v. 3
 - B. The Power of Words, v. 4
 - 1. Anyone's Words Can Be Dangerous, v. 4a
 - 2. Wisdom's Words Give Life and Beauty, v. 4b
 - C. The Fool's Words, vv. 5-8
 - 1. Hinder righteous verdicts, v. 5
 - 2. Prevent peace and quiet, v. 6
 - 3. Destroy his life, v. 7
 - 4. Taste really good, v. 8
 - D. The Fool's Destructiveness, v. 9
 - 1. He's Lazy, v. 9a
 - 2. He's Akin to a Master of Destruction, v. 9b
- II. The Fool's Fortress (and the Wise Man's Refuge), vv. 10-11
 - A. God's Character Is the Wise Son's Refuge, v. 10
 - B. The Fool Believes in Money, v. 11

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we could almost have titled this sermon as another profile in folly. After all, our text begins with three types of fool, and then warns about the words the fool speaks and the destruction that he brings to himself and his community. It closes with a warning against the folly of trusting in wealth.

So where's the positive value in this text? Well, it does contain one clearly positive verse — verse 10, where we are told that the character of God is a refuge for the righteous when the fool goes around committing his destructive folly. And aside from that positive verse, every verse implies something about the wise Son. He is the opposite of a fool in every way. So even as you hear about the negative, focus on the positive — focus on the reign and perfection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We'll see in our text this morning that the talkative fool destroys himself and his community; by implication, then, we will also see that the prudent-speaking wise Son protects and keeps Himself and His people. So take refuge from folly in the community of Christ

that we call the church. There, protected by the name and character of God, you will be spared from committing the destructive mayhem and saying the fatuous things that define the fool.

I. The Wordy Fool: Character and Destiny, vv. 1-9

As we have seen so many times already in Proverbs, this section focuses on speech and on the fool. There's a connection there, folks.

A. Three Types of Fool, vv. 1-3

It opens by profiling three types of fool, all of whom are distinguished (surprise, surprise) by their speech.

1. The Loner, v. 1

The first of these types is the loner — the antisocial man, the separatist. He goes off on his own, trying to escape the bonds that hold him to other human beings so that he can more effectively pursue his own desires.

Brothers and sisters, this type is one of which we are well aware. We associate this kind of person with serial killing, child molesting, and other kinds of violent, heinous crime. But the basic profile is a lot more common, and thus a lot more scary, than that. Solomon is identifying as a fool anyone who wants to escape the bonds of society in order to pursue his own desires. The Bible is not communitarian, but it most certainly condemns that type of unbridled individualism. Yes, there are evil people and domestic abusers out there. And in some cases, one or two particular evil family or household members really can just about ruin your life. If you want to flee the bonds that hold you to such villains, that may not be an act of folly. But Solomon is not talking about breaking off one or two close relationships that evil men use to poison your life. He's talking about a much bigger thing: deliberately weakening the bonds that hold you to society in general for the sake of doing whatever you want and not having to answer to anyone for it.

When you live alone, and have no close friends or relatives who expect you to be in certain places at certain times doing certain things every day, you really are free to go where you like and do what you like and never have anyone ask you about it. Brothers and sisters, that kind of social atomization is not good. Deliberately seeking that kind of social atomization for the sake of doing what you feel like and never being challenged about it is a truly foolish action.

Now, for those of us who live in young families, it may seem like this really is a pipe dream. Who would separate himself from his family so that he could do whatever he wanted? Plenty of people do. Our society is full of children who don't live with both of their biological parents, mothers who don't live with their kids' fathers and fathers who don't live with their kids' mothers — or their kids. Brothers and sisters, indeed our society is absolutely full of people like this factious man, this self-isolator. We all know people who have left their families, or families who have left their rightful members. And once free from that most basic of all human communities, cut adrift, they wander from pleasure to pleasure. Indeed, we can easily see that the one who forsakes community, who rejects his family and his friends, is seeking his own desire. He wants what he wants, and woe be to any relationship that stands in the way of getting it.

King Solomon's acid verdict on this fellow is well-deserved: "He rages against all sound wisdom." Did you get that? The guy has declared war on common sense. The word "sound wisdom" means "wisdom that's so good, that so in tune with the nature of things, that it always succeeds." This means, then, that the loner is not just attacking wisdom but success itself. He hates success; he rages against it. The last thing he wants to do is prosper, we could say. Brothers and sisters, this is literally the attitude of the person who breaks away from close relationships in order to more efficiently seek out his own desires and do whatever he wants. Again, remember that this is not the only kind of folly or the only kind of sin. Some evil fools draw their family in close and crush them so that they, the abusers, the evil fools, can do whatever they want more efficiently. But brothers and sisters, that's not the sin that's being warned against here. We're not talking about the abuser, but about the loner. Don't leave your community so that you can go off and sin; that's not only evil; it's a recipe for disaster. The fact that Americans have been doing it for generations shows in the opioid crisis, the rise in deaths of despair, falling life expectancy, and an overwhelmingly partisan, polarized society where different groups live by diametrically opposed moral codes.

How can you and I be loners without leaving our families and churches? We can hide particular sins, doing in secret things that we know our community would not approve of. We can have many relationships but never go deeper, never allow anyone to have a real conversation with us. In either of these ways, we can isolate ourselves from our community and seek to achieve our own desires. To do this is to rage against sound wisdom — that is, to abandon the prospect of success at life because we have adopted means radically contrary to success. I recently heard about a woman who doesn't want to take care of her little children but prefers instead to run a business. Her friends have been urging her not to neglect her children for the sake of her business; her response has been to tell them that she's moving a thousand miles away so that she can do what she wants without them bothering her. Brothers and sisters, that is an open-and-shut case of isolating yourself to seek your own desire. This woman is raging against all sound wisdom.

2. The Opinionated, v. 2

Alas! She is not the only kind of fool out there. The second kind of fool is far more annoying to others, and just as dangerous to himself. Solomon describes himself as one who delights only in exposing his own heart. Modern translations paraphrase this as "expressing his opinion." The fool does not delight in understanding; he has no interest in learning what's actually going on. All he cares about is saying what he thinks.

My brother-in-law shared a fun anecdote this week. He told me that someone new visited their small group. This fellow was waxing eloquent on China and the dangers of its communist system. Jared asked him what communism was; the man couldn't say. Jared said, "Communism is a system in which the state owns all the means of production; does that sound like contemporary China to you?"

The man grew indignant at this and said, “How come you know so much about China, anyway?”

Jared responded, “I teach military officers graduate courses about Chinese history.”

Amazingly enough, that shut down this particular fool. He may have lacked delight in understanding, but he understood enough to know that his opinion was no longer wanted and that he was only making himself ridiculous.

But a true fool, a fool of the worst stripe (and remember, Solomon is presenting us with the most exaggerated picture to enable us to see the characteristics of folly clearly) would have simply kept going. On hearing that someone who taught graduate seminars on China was in his midst, he would have been unable to resist airing his faulty opinions at even greater length. But being only a mild fool, this one closed his mouth.

Brothers and sisters, do you want to take delight in understanding or in airing your own opinion? It’s clear what the wise son does. And it’s clear what the fool does.

3. The Outcast, v. 3

Well, the third kind of fool we see here is the one whose wickedness has made him contemptible, dishonored, and reproached. In other words, this is a social outcast. His evil has gotten to the point where other people don’t want him around. He’s an outcast. He’s a pariah.

This is what will happen if you give yourself over to sin. Your sin may be separating yourself — that’s bad. Or it may be talking over others, always giving your own opinion rather than trying to understand theirs (and sift out the real truth). Or it may be any kind of wickedness resulting in all kinds of shame, reproach, and dishonor. True wisdom gives true fame, true reputation; the false wisdom of folly yields only reproach.

B. The Power of Words, v. 4

Having looked at the three types of fools, we now get to listen to them as well. We’ll see four characteristics of the fool’s words — but first, we see the sage’s teaching about the power of words. It seems to me that we are supposed to see a contrast between the deep waters and the rushing brook. So we’ll look at the power of words under two points.

1. Anyone’s Words Can Be Dangerous, v. 4a

First, anyone’s words can be dangerous. The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters. What does this mean? It means that what someone says can be unfathomable, dark, dangerous. The riddles and opacities of other people’s words will baffle the wisest of us. “What did they mean by that? What was that supposed to mean?” are questions all of us have asked. A man of understanding can navigate these deep waters and draw out someone’s true meaning, we are told later in Proverbs. But that would also seem to imply that if your understanding is limited, if you know something about your own folly, you definitely should not be navigating these deep waters.

2. Wisdom’s Words Give Life and Beauty, v. 4b

But wisdom’s words are not “deep,” in the sense of dark and dangerous. They are ceaseless, fresh, refreshing, and powerful. Yes, wisdom will sweep you off your feet — but she won’t drown you unless you’re really trying. That, at least, is how I take the contrast in this verse.

Perhaps both halves of the verse are comparing wisdom to water. But I think the first half is saying that trying to figure someone else out completely is like spelunking — it's a dangerous deep dive from which you might not return. The second half is saying that wisdom flows plentifully and joyfully, and that the stream of wisdom is available to all to drink from.

C. The Fool's Words, vv. 5-8

Well, we can see the danger of some of those deep waters as we look at the fool's words. They are powerful, and it's generally not a power for good.

1. Hinder righteous verdicts, v. 5

First of all, the fool's words hinder righteous verdicts. Indeed, to mess up the judgment process, whether in a formal court of law or in some less formal forum for decision making, is not good.

Partiality means favor: "I'm partial to smoked salmon." That is, I will choose it far sooner than I will choose the boiled liver and raw peas on the next platter. If you're partial to the wicked, there's only one explanation: You're wicked yourself. Maybe you're partial to the bribe they can pay, or the kickback they'll give, or some other facet of their life. But basically, no matter what reason you give, if you're partial to the wicked, that's wicked. Thrusting aside the righteous — that is, taking someone who did no wrong and effectively expelling him from court as a man without a case — is also not good. In both cases, one can say that the speech of the fool is at work. To say to the wicked "You're right" is a foolish claim. Don't make it.

2. Prevent peace and quiet, v. 6

But secondly, the fool's words prevent peace and quiet. His lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. It's a principle of human life: If you ask for it long enough, you're going to get it. And often, after someone gets treated brutally, bystanders will say "He was asking for it." Why do you want to beat up a fool? Because he just won't shut up! Brothers and sisters, again, the wise sage is warning us against saying whatever folly pops into our head. Letting your tongue wag is a good way to get in trouble.

Think about the wise Son quickly with me. He never hinders righteous verdicts; He never shows favor to the wicked while thrusting the righteous away. He never says things for which He would deserve to be beaten (though He was beaten for His good works and words!).

3. Destroy his life, v. 7

The fool's words destroy his life. If only he couldn't talk! Indeed, brothers and sisters, this wish highlights just why the fool is so terrible. The power of speech is the glory of the rational creature. No other animal can talk, can share ideas and concepts of anything and everything, with others, whether others of its kind or of our kind. Only we can do that. Speech is a power of the rational soul, and it is a power that the vegetative soul and the animal soul do not possess. Yet here we are saying openly that foolish human beings would be better off if they too lacked the power of speech! Oh, brothers and sisters, what does this mean? It means that fools have fallen so far below the level of the truly human that they would be better off as beasts. At least a beast can't destroy itself with words. It can't set a trap that will catch and destroy its own life.

So how do you protect yourself from a fool? Just wait. He'll do himself in. But as our political scene shows only too well, he can do a lot of damage in the process.

4. Taste really good, v. 8

Why is that? Brothers and sisters, it's because the fool's words taste really good. The things he says are delicious to listen to anytime they involve the shortcomings of other people. I've told you before about my grandmother's neighbor who lived for gossip and would literally call on the phone and open the conversation with "Cheryl, have I got a hot one for you!"

A piece of gossip is something you don't soon forget. You may not remember your own address or phone number in ten years, but you will likely remember that juicy tidbit about so-and-so. It sinks right down into the casket of the belly, to a place in the permanent archives.

So what's the implication here? Let me put it plainly: If you delight in gossip, you're a fool. If you love hearing information about things where you aren't part of the problem or part of the solution, then you love folly.

You see, folly is not just about what you say. It's equally about what you choose to listen to. If you fill your heart and mind with the gossip of the pundits, the tasty whisperings of the other teachers in the lounge, the ridiculous antics of friends of friends, even the juicy details of your own parents or siblings' relational foolishness, you are a fool.

Jesus never gossiped. Jesus never said something that destroyed His life. Yes, He made people mad, but that wasn't His folly but His wisdom. He came on a mission and that mission involved getting Himself killed. He succeeded brilliantly at what He came to do, which was to die in our place without doing anything in the least deserving death. Though people killed Him because they didn't like what He said, His mouth was not His ruin; it was how He accomplished His mission.

Can you worship Him for that? Don't let the tastiness of the fool's tidbits tempt you. Brothers and sisters, the tastiness of the fool's morsels makes it only a matter of time before they kill you. Worse, they prevent you from focusing on Christ, whom to see is life eternal. The foolish son listens to gossip, but the wise son talks about what really matters — Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

D. The Fool's Destructiveness, v. 9

Our passage started with profiles of three different types of fool. The first of these types would cut ties with his community so that he could more easily give himself to sin. In that sense, he was antisocial. But here, at the end of the section, we read about two other kinds of fools: the lazy man and the master of destruction, both of whom ruin much good.

1. He's Lazy, v. 9a

One type of fool is the slacker. He would rather not work and so he doesn't work. He has work that he ought to do; he's here not just to eat, but to glorify God by laboring six days a week and doing all his work. Yes, the fool is destructive because he fails to do the work which God has assigned him. Moms, if you don't care for your home and children, if you check out from your job for just one week, I guarantee the results will be disastrous. And the same is true of any other

job. If you don't do the work, it doesn't get done, and the result is destruction. To laze instead of working is the action of a fool.

2. He's Akin to a Master of Destruction, v. 9b

Yet we're all lazy at times. Laziness doesn't seem so bad — yet Solomon says that the lazy man is akin to a master of destruction. The word for "master" is "Baal," the name of a false god of that era which is literally translated as "lord, master." That word "baal" is paired with the word that means "destruction." Yes, it sounds like a video game handle, but it's actually serious. If you don't work like you should, you're akin to (Hebrew idiom "brother of") a master of destruction. You're just like someone who burns cities, smashes cars, wrecks food, destroys roads and buildings, and clear-cuts old growth forests.

We don't like to think of our sin as being like that. "My sin is minor. How dare you compare me to a master of destruction. Are you really saying that if I take Saturday afternoon to watch the game, I'm some kind of comic-book villain?" Yes, friend, that's exactly what I'm saying. If you ought to be working and instead you're sitting in front of the TV, you're destroying the good you should have been producing. If you're supposed to be writing a sermon and instead you're reading Wikipedia, you're like a comic book villain. You're destroying good by preventing it from ever happening. If you're supposed to be putting children to bed and instead you're surfing Facebook, you're like a master of destruction.

This sounds so ludicrous to us. We want to believe that our lives are not nearly this bad, that our sins are not nearly this bad, that the lazy person and the master of destruction are both fantasies rather than serious business. But the evidence all around us of the broken homes and lives left behind in the wake of the sexual revolution says otherwise. The man who leaves his family in order to be lazy is akin to a master of destruction. The man who leaves his family in order to have sexual pleasure with whoever he wants is akin to master of destruction. And if you're doing that, you're a fool. If you're failing to do your work because you feel like playing, even if it's only for five minutes, you're a fool.

II. The Fool's Fortress (and the Wise Man's Refuge), vv. 10-11

Brothers and sisters, where does that leave us? How can anyone stand if laziness is as bad a giving unrighteous judgments in a courtroom or leaving your family to pursue pleasure? The answer, of course, is that no one can stand.

A. God's Character Is the Wise Son's Refuge, v. 10

That's why Solomon includes this proverb here. Many of the proverbs allow us to say, "Wow, glad I'm not like the fool." But I think v. 9 particularly hits home by saying "You see all the different facets of the fool? If you fit any of those descriptions, you're like a master of destruction." That's what we're like. I'm like that. You're like that. So what do we do? We flee to the name of the LORD. God's name stands for His character, for all that He truly is. When He passed by and proclaimed His name to Moses, He said "A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." To run to the name of Yahweh, then, is to say "Yahweh is like this:

He is gracious, merciful, and forgiving.” And then, armed with knowledge, go to Him, throw yourself on His mercy, and seek His forgiveness. When you do that, you’re protected from God’s wrath by God’s own character. The righteous hides in the fortress of who God is from the wrath that God will rain down on every master of destruction, every loner, every outcast, every opinionated rascal.

Are you practiced at doing this? Do you actually believe what the Bible says about the character of God? Do you flee to Him for refuge every time you become aware of your own sin and folly?

B. The Fool Believes in Money, v. 11

What’s the alternative? It’s a completely absurd belief in money. The fool trusts wealth and thinks that it is his bulwark and fortress. But the second proverb in this section told us that treasures of wickedness profit nothing. Any money you make in a wrong way — and that includes any money you make without loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and your neighbor as yourself — is a treasure of wickedness that cannot and will not deliver from death. Indeed, it will turn out to be ultimately profitless.

Brothers and sisters, the fool’s fatuous fortress is his money. He imagines that things like illness, sickness, weakness, relational difficulties, and even poverty itself are too weak to climb the wall of his golden fortress. And it’s true; just think of all the wealthy people in history who are still alive and well and never had anything bad happen to them. Oh wait. They’re all dead.

Where is your refuge? Do you think money will protect you from the wrath of God against your lord of destruction-like activities? I beg you not to be such a fool! Seek Christ for salvation. Find salvation in Him. He is the Lord of Life, the Lord of Glory, and the Lord of Wisdom. When He was hanging on the cross, He sought salvation in the Father’s name, and there He was safe. It was through the Father’s might that He rose again. It certainly wasn’t through the power of money.

So I beg you: don’t cut off your relationships to seek your own pleasures. Instead, cut off your guilty pleasures to seek Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Run to Him; hide in His character. And you’ll be not only safe, but saved. That, my friend, is the only wise way to live. Amen.