

# Ecclesiastes 10:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

## Analysis

**Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour**—(יבאַיְשׁ יְבָעֵעַ שְׁמֵן רָקֶם זְבוּבִי מִות) the Hebrew zevuvei mavet (flies of death/dead flies) contaminate expensive perfumed oil (shemen roqeach, apothecary's ointment). The verb yav'ish (יבאַיְשׁ, cause to stink) emphasizes how small contamination ruins great value. Ancient perfumers mixed costly spices—myrrh, frankincense, cinnamon—with olive oil to create precious ointments. A single dead insect spoils the entire batch.

**So doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour** (יבאַר) likewise, a small amount of sikhlut ( folly) outweighs great chokmah (חָכָמָה, wisdom) and kavod (כָּבֹוד, honor/glory). One foolish act can destroy a lifetime reputation for wisdom. The asymmetry is sobering: building wise reputation requires years of consistent choices, but one foolish moment can demolish it. This anticipates Jesus's warning about little compromises: "he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10). James warns that the tongue, though small, can set great fires (James 3:5-6)—small folly produces disproportionate destruction.

## Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern honor-shame cultures placed enormous value on reputation. A wise person's counsel shaped communities, resolved disputes, and guided kings

(2 Samuel 16:23 describes Ahithophel's counsel as oracular). One foolish choice could permanently destroy this social capital—consider Rehoboam's folly in rejecting wise counsel, splitting the kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-19). The perfumer metaphor resonated in societies where spices and oils were luxury commodities, often worth their weight in silver. The Preacher warns that hard-won wisdom and honor remain perpetually vulnerable to compromise. Church history confirms this pattern: leaders falling through "small" sins—financial impropriety, sexual compromise, doctrinal deviation—destroying decades of faithful ministry. The Reformers emphasized perseverance—faith that doesn't endure through final faithfulness isn't saving faith (Calvin).

## Related Passages

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**Psalm 19:1** — Heavens declare God's glory

**Colossians 1:16** — All things created through Christ

## Study Questions

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1. What "little folly" are you tolerating that could contaminate your witness and undermine years of faithfulness?
2. How can you maintain vigilance against small compromises that seem insignificant but carry disproportionate destructive potential?

## Interlinear Text

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שׁתַּי יְבָא יְשָׁעָתָה יְבָא יְשָׁעָתָה יְבָא יְשָׁעָתָה  
flies Dead a stinking savour to send forth cause the ointment

H2070

Dead

a stinking savour

to send forth

cause the ointment

H887

H5042

H8081

סָכַל וְתַּמְכֵב וְדַמְכַכֵּת הַרְקָעָה  
folly and honour for wisdom him that is in reputation of the apothecary

H7543

H3368

H2451

H3519

H5531

מְעֻטָּה:  
so doth a little

H4592

## Additional Cross-References

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**Nehemiah 13:26** (Kingdom): Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin.

**Exodus 30:25** (Parallel theme): And thou shalt make it an oil of holy ointment, an ointment compound after the art of the apothecary: it shall be an holy anointing oil.

**2 Chronicles 19:2** (Kingdom): And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD.