

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 (זְבוּבֵי מוֹת, flies of death/dead flies) contaminate expensive perfumed oil (shemen roqeach, שֶׁמֶן רוֹקֵחַ, apothecary's ointment). The verb yav'ish (יִבְאִישׁ, 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 (יִקָּר, sikhlut, סִכְלִיּוֹת, folly) outweighs great chokmah (חֻכְמָה, wisdom) and kavod (כְּבוֹד, 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

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

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

מִן זֶב וּבִי	יָבֵא יֵשׁ	יִבְּ יַעַ	שֶׁ מִן	
flies	Dead	a stinking savour	to send forth	cause the ointment
H2070	H4194	H887	H5042	H8081
רוֹקֵן הַ	יָקָר רַ	מִחֲכָמָה הַ	מִכָּבֹּד וְ	סָכָל וְ
of the apothecary	him that is in reputation	for wisdom	and honour	folly
H7543	H3368	H2451	H3519	H5531
מְעַט:				
so doth a little				
H4592				

Additional Cross-References

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.