

Hope PCA Sermon: March 3, 2024

Ecclesiastes 8:1–9 “Man’s Destructive Power over Man”

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Taking a little break this morning from 1 Peter to a return to this occasional series in Ecclesiastes. And we’ll be looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verses 1 through 9 this morning. And I think you’ll find that it has some relevance to the things that we’ve been seeing in 1 Peter. If you would, please stand in honor of the reading of God’s Word. Let me read it for us, and then we will consider it together. As always, this is the very living word of our living God. Ecclesiastes 8, 1-9.

¹ Who is like the wise?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

A man’s wisdom makes his face shine,

And the hardness of his face is changed.

² I say: Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him. ³ Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. ⁴ For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, “What are you doing?” ⁵ Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. ⁶ For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him. ⁷ For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? ⁸ No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. ⁹ All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.

This is God’s holy, infallible, and inerrant word. May it be written and take root deep within our hearts. Please be seated and we pray for us as we come to that word.

Oh God, our Father, would you bless this time when we consider in some depth the Word that is before us from Ecclesiastes, from the wise man that you inspired to give this word to us. Bless us. May your Word go out and not return to you empty; may it fulfill every purpose for which you have sent it out. May that be true here this morning, may it be true as even the Word goes out from beyond this place. We thank you and praise you, in Jesus’ name, amen.

Well, we’ve been in a long section of 1 Peter that talks about submission in various circumstances. And I think if there’s one thing we can see and say about what Peter’s shown us, it’s certainly that submission to those that God has put in authority over us is not easy. It’s especially not easy when they use that authority to oppress us, to use that authority unjustly, to revile us, to insult us, to threaten us. And it can be a hard providence to endure oppression, especially as God has called us to be willing to suffer for doing good and called us to bless

those who do evil to us and insult us. That's not easy. That goes against our natural human nature. These last few lessons from 1 Peter indeed have been challenging. They've been daunting. And now in God's providence we come to this passage in Ecclesiastes about obedience to human authority, obedience to the king. I did not plan it this way. This is how it happened. But here we are.

And indeed I think the preacher sounds a lot like Peter here in Ecclesiastes when he calls us to submit to human authority, applies it to the king, noting at the same time that man has power over man who is hurt. In other words, what the preacher is saying here is that the powerful hurt those with less power or even without power. But even in this passage, as we've seen and talked about in Peter, the preacher, I think, makes a provision for disobedience to that authority in the proper context.

It's interesting to think about what happens when we disobey authority for consciousness' sake. I'm reading a book, a new book, on deacons by a guy named Matt Smethurst. It's a small little book, easy to read, very helpful. He talks about deacon service, but he gives a couple examples of exemplary service. One of them is that it takes place during World War II. It's in the Netherlands. Germany had conquered the Netherlands in 1940 and oppressed a lot of people, citizens and others. And the deacons in the Dutch Reformed Church were noted for taking care of those who were in need. They needed food, they needed clothing. They even hid people who needed a secret place of refuge. And of course the Germans didn't like this, and there was a decree that was issued that the office of deacon (and this is a state church), the office of deacon must be eliminated. And on July 17th, 1941, the General Senate of the Dutch Reformed Church passed a resolution. Here's part of how it reads: "Whoever touches the diaconate interferes with what Christ has ordained as the task of the church. Whoever lays hands on *diakonia* (the Greek word there), lays hands on worship." That's defiance. And they put it in very clear terms. This isn't just people helping people. This is the worship of God that's at stake. You know what the Germans did? They backed down. They backed down.

Second example, from the Roman Empire, middle of the 3rd century, the emperor is Valerian, another emperor who seeks to persecute Christians. He uses an edict that in Rome all the bishops, all the priests, all the deacons are to be captured and killed. He's trying to wipe out the church. And there's a man named Lawrence who's a deacon in the church and he's in charge of all the finances and treasures of the church, objects of value. He's captured but not immediately killed. He's offered his freedom if he will bring all those treasures, all that money, and give it to the Roman authorities. So he asks, "Give me three days." He goes around and he finds others to entrust these things to, to take care of them, to keep them safe, to keep them out of the Roman hands. And then he goes around in the church and he rounds up those who are sick, those who are elderly, the widows, the orphans, the poor, and on the third day he takes him to this meeting and the magistrates are in an uproar. Who are all these people? Who is this rabble that you brought? He said, "Well, I did what I said I'd do. I have brought you the treasures of the church: the poor, the sick, the widows, the orphans." How did the Romans respond? They didn't like it. They burned him alive. There's a, I think, probably apocryphal story, but it's widely repeated that as he was being burned, Lawrence said, "Guys, I'm done on this side. How about turning me over?" That's some cheek right there.

What happens if we disobey authority? We don't know. Will they back down? Will they kill us? We don't know how it will turn out. But they cannot compel us to sin. That we know. And we have to decide: how are we going to live in relation to those in authority over us? It's a question that's faced believers. Peter addresses it. Paul addresses it. And in the end, it doesn't matter what kind of authority it is. The preacher talks about a king. It could be a democracy. It could be a republic. It could be a dictator. some sort of communist or socialist government, an oligarchy — who knows? Whatever the authority is, we're called to submit. Very simple guidance, but terribly difficult to grasp and to implement.

I do think Ecclesiastes 8 verses 1 to 9 here is as good a summary of the breadth of Scripture's teaching on the subject as any. Peter and Paul tell us to submit. Ecclesiastes sympathizes with us, understands, and again, I think, gives us due cause for times when we do not submit. So it includes the idea of submission to the government, to the authorities, but also gives us some practical things to think about as we think about and try to apply that general rule.

So this morning as we go through what the text teaches us, I've got five points. I'm a good Calvinist today. But I don't have a good acronym. Oh well. Five points. But before we get to the five points, there's an issue in verse 1 that I think needs to be addressed.

Verse 1 asks a very important question: "Who is wise? Who knows the interpretation of a thing?" Now, so far as we've gone through Ecclesiastes, these kinds of questions were rhetorical. And as often as not, the answer was: nobody. Who knows this? Nobody. Who can figure it out? Nobody. Who understands it? Nobody. It's part of the vanity, part of the pointlessness of life under the sun.

But the second half of the verse prevents us from taking that very simple approach: "A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed." There's kind of an answer there. Wisdom can be found. And wisdom, when it's found, has benefits. It makes a man's face shine. It makes a person's face change, its hardness is softened. In other words, wisdom is good. There's an old line from the movies that people like to quote: "It's good to be keen." The Bible's perspective is: it's good to be wise. Wisdom is rare. We saw that back in chapter seven. The preacher's soul, he says, "My soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found wisdom." But wisdom can be found, he assures us in verse one of chapter eight. So we can pursue wisdom, we can find wisdom, and I think that's helpful to remember as we consider these five things this morning. Because the benefits are good, wisdom is worth pursuing. That's the first idea: wisdom is worth pursuing. The benefits of it are worth pursuing.

Where does wisdom come from? It comes from God. You can see it on a person's face. And I don't know about you, but every person I can think of who I've known who is spiritually wise, there's something different about them. There's a calm, softened demeanor. Maybe there is a sense of contentment, a sense of peace, something that you can see in their manner, in the way that they behave, maybe even in their face. I was sharing with the man yesterday at the breakfast of an elder we had at the first PCA church we were a part of, an incredibly wise, wise man. Not an expert in Reformed theology, not particularly wise by the world standards, but one of the wisest men I've ever known. And he was a man whose face was gentle and

calm, and his speech was gentle and calm, but it had, that wisdom had a force about it. Gave me some of the best advice I ever heard as a young man, just beginning to try to understand my calling in life in the church. There's truth in what the preacher's saying here, and it's worth taking to heart. Wisdom is from God.

Heeding that wisdom brings peace and contentment. It doesn't mean we go through life without frustration or times when we are angry or upset. But those aren't the dominant character traits. It's not what rules how we live our lives. The person who is biblically wise has something about them that others can see. Wisdom is worth pursuing.

And the second thing that I think flows from that, especially as we consider what the preacher goes on to say in verses 2 through 9, that how to live in relation with those in authority is going to require wisdom. He says in verse 9 at the end of this section, he's pursued this study. "All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun." Again, we've talked about this before: the preacher is a man who leaves no stone unturned. He's relentless in his pursuit of wisdom. He's applied his heart to it. He's pursued it And he's passing on that wisdom to us. Actually, that was not the first of the five points. Those were two ideas about verse one. Now let's get to the five points. Sorry about that. I confused myself.

All right, the first point. **Obey the king.** It's simple advice. Keep the king's command. This is perfectly consistent with what we've seen in 1 Peter. With what Paul writes in Romans 13 with Jesus' simple instruction to render under Caesar that which is Caesar's, to God that which is God's. There's a general biblical truth that comes through the pages of scripture to us that we are to submit to those in authority. It even goes back to the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and mother that it may go well with you in the land of the Lord your God is giving you." And we apply that by extension to those in authority over us. Obey the king.

He tells us in verse three: don't be hasty to leave the king's presence. This would have been seen as an act of rebellion. Think of Daniel and others who stood in the king's presence because they were there to serve the king. And so to leave is to abandon that service. So they stand with the king. and he calls upon us. "Don't stand with those who scheme in an evil cause." The king rules. You have no business questioning what he does. Maybe a crassly simple example of this is: I've been in a lot of choirs, and I've been in a lot of bands. And when you join a choir, you sing what the director picks out, even if you don't like it. When you're in the band, you play what the director picks out, even if you don't like it. It's a simple application of this. We don't question.

And it's a hard word again. The word of the king is supreme. Who may say to him, "What are you doing?" The natural response is to find some way out of this. Find some way to make it not so. We don't want to submit to authority, whether a king or a governor or a band director. The cry of William Wallace at the end of that movie, as he's about to be drawn and quartered, it just rings in our ears. I love it. I love the movie. I love his cry at the end. "Freedom! Freedom! We want freedom!" And yet the Bible says again to us over and over: submit to authority. Joseph to Pharaoh in Egypt, Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar, to Caesar in paying our taxes, more broadly in Paul's and Peter's instruction to the New Testament church. We ought to have a

general disposition as believers and a readiness to submit to the authorities that God has put in charge over us.

Preacher gives an interesting reason in verse 2: "Because of God's oath to the king." Literally in Hebrew it just reads, "because of God's oath." Translators want to figure out what is meant here. The Hebrew here is like a lot of wisdom literature Hebrew: not grammatically clean and clear. So what does this phrase, "because of God's oath, mean?" The ESV, as we read it, comes down on the side of understanding this as God's oath to the king. It's an idea reminiscent of God's oath to David, for example, to keep a son of his on the throne forever. God has given this throne to David and his sons, and therefore, people of Israel, you are to obey David and his sons. But this isn't about life in Israel. It's about life under the sun, human existence. Other scholars try to make it an oath of the people before God to submit to the king. And therefore what the preacher is saying here is: keep your oath to the king. But again, this isn't about life in Israel, it's about life under the sun in any kingdom, in any place or nation, at any time, anywhere. I think it's rather simple: God made an oath.

And we get a hint of this, an idea of it in Romans 13 verse 4, which talks about God's wrath being carried out against evildoers through the king that he appoints. I think that's the general idea that the preacher has in mind: God has sworn to punish evil, to punish sin. Ever since the fall in the garden, that sentence is death. Exodus 34 says, He will not let sinners go unpunished. "I will by no means let the guilty go unpunished," says God. Part of God's fulfillment of that oath, His own oath, is through the agency of authorities that He's put over us. Kings, governments, governors, whoever they may be. Therefore there's a duty that we have to pay them proper respect, knowing that through them, God may be punishing or disciplining us for our own sin. And yet we still ask. I ask it. If you're not asking it, I'd be astonished. "Really? Obey? Without question? Without exception?" The preacher addresses this too.

The second point: **There's a time and a way for everything, including obedience to the king.** I think this is what the preacher is saying in verses 5 and 6: "Whoever keeps the command will know no evil thing." That's kind of a promise. "But the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him." There's a time, there's a proper time, there's a proper way for all things. The wise man doesn't pursue evil so as not to come under the king's justice, but also the one who is wise knows the proper time and the just way for everything. This is an echo of Ecclesiastes 3, that long section: There's a time and a purpose for everything under heaven. God has a time and a purpose for all things. So there's a time for obeying and there's a time for not obeying. And wisdom seeks to understand this.

And scripture gives us examples. The apostles stood before the Jewish leaders and refused to obey them. And we might think, well, it was just Jewish leaders, what obedience did they owe them? Well, remember what Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 23, verses one and following. He says, "So do and observe whatever they tell you, for they sit in the seat of Moses." But they disobey. How can they do this when Christ told them to submit? Because we have to obey God rather than men. You're telling us to sin. You're telling us to do something that is contrary to God's commands, and we cannot do that. Think about Jonathan, who did not obey

his father Saul in regard to his friend David, to turn him over, to reveal his whereabouts to his father, who was trying to kill him. It would have been a sin for Jonathan to obey his father in that. Daniel did not obey the unlawful requirement to cease from praying. It would have been a sin to do so. Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego did not bow down to the statue and worship it. It would have been a sin to do so.

So again, this principle that we've talked about, illustrated throughout Scripture: if authority requires us, even commands us, to do something that is sinful, we do not have to do it. More forcefully, we must not do it. The Dutch church could not abolish the office of deacon. God has put that office in place. Good old Lawrence, who wanted to be turned over so that he burned evenly on both sides, could not obey the command to bring the church's treasures to Caesar. They did not belong to him. They were God's. Render unto God that which is God's. We obey God, ultimately, rather than men. And the Old Testament reinforces what we've seen already in the New Testament. That seems simple, and yet again, it requires wisdom to apply it.

There's been recent controversy. You've probably read about it. I know some of us have discussed it. The minister, well-known, well-respected minister who gave advice to a grandmother to attend a same-sex wedding. Is that right? How could it be right? What about teachers who are encouraged in their classrooms to support and promote the gender identity craze with their young children in their classrooms? What about workplace requirements, whereas some of you I know work that require you to get on board and support various ideas and practices contrary to God's Word, from simple things like pronouns to more profound things like identity and deviantly sexual behavior.

What about when laws are passed? What do we do? Last year we prayed about a proposal that came before our very own legislature, that came close to passing: that would require pastors to report, as abuse, parents who will not support their children in a new identity, or even with medication and surgery, pursuing that supposed identity. I'll tell you right now, I'm not gonna obey that law. In case any of you are worried, ain't gonna happen. Is the line of obedience still crossed when the government passes a law or when they try to enforce the law? What do we do? When do we do it? How do we do it? We debate these things, we discuss these things, and we should so that we can hopefully arrive at wisdom. The preacher was diligent: "All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun." Let us be as diligent as he was in pursuing wisdom.

And that leads to point three. **Deciding when to obey and when not to obey is very, very hard.** He acknowledges this in verse 6. It lies heavy on us. Who can tell what it's going to be? Does the European Christian in World War II lie to the Nazi pounding on the door asking if Jews are hiding in their home? Lying is a sin. Should you tell the truth? I've had this debate with other Christians, many of whom will say, yes, I would tell the truth. Is it a greater sin to allow these people to be captured and put to death or a greater sin to lie? What do we do? How do we protect life? How do we obey the government that's in charge? Think about military service. Do I have the right? Should I kill other people just because my government tells me to? Is military service consistent with Christian love and charity, the preservation of life? How does military service and war allow me to live peaceably with all men?

And what if the war itself is questionable? We've had questions about most of our wars as a nation recently. Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea. I mean, even go back to the Civil War. Go back to the Revolutionary War. Were these just wars? What about Christian service in these things? I've got my opinions, you've got yours. Seeking wisdom is not obvious all the time. There were Christians who served with great distinction and great honor, both to their nation and I think to God, in World War II. There were other Christians who were objectors. There's a recent movie about a conscientious objector, a Christian who nevertheless served as a medic, refused to carry a rifle, and I think his life story was made into a movie about how on one of the islands in the Pacific campaign he ran into enemy fire and brought out those who were wounded so that they could be taken care of.

Verses 7 and 8 remind us of how limited our knowledge is about anything, even something as inevitable as our own death. We just don't know. If we don't know that, how can we think we are wise? And yet we are called to wisdom. The preacher goes on to say that kings and governments make war. It's what they do. Citizens fight in their wars. That's what we do. The preacher is saying in these verses there's no discharge from it. There's no escape from it. It comes. It comes by voluntary service. It comes by conscription, forced service. Either way, it comes. And there's wickedness in war, of war itself in general. It's a horrible, terrible enterprise. Does not deliver those who engage in it. It may sometimes be very necessary to protect life, to preserve justice. But it's rare for war to be truly a final answer. There is a sense of futility, of pointlessness, in the horror that comes from war, everything that goes with it.

Still, forcing a Christian to sin is forbidden. A Christian soldier in that Nazi army does not have to carry out orders to wantonly kill Jews. That's murder. He may even work against the government's decree, and not to do so could easily be considered a sin. Even the Christian soldier in the end must obey God rather than men. But it's still a hard choice because war is awful, horrible, a terrible endeavor, and yet sometimes necessary to accomplish what is good and through it great harm is nevertheless done. Choosing when to obey and when not to obey kings is very difficult. We shouldn't pretend that it's otherwise. We shouldn't oversimplify it.

The horrible nature of war leads to a fourth point. **A king or some ruler is necessary, but this tends to devolve into man abusing man.** Government is necessary. We need to be organized. We need structure. Anarchy is not a viable biblical option. For one reason, God has ordained authority for the purpose of restraining evil. For another, God is the God of order and truth, not chaos. But verse 9 brings us to a very sobering reality, this study that the preacher's been doing, this examination, intense, of all things, applying his heart to things under the sun. And what does he see? Man's power over man to his hurt. Reminds me of the old saying that I'm sure you've heard from Lord Acton, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." I tend to focus on the latter part of that saying, "absolute power corrupts absolutely", but it glosses over, I think, the unfortunate truth of the first part of that saying, "power corrupts", even if it's not absolute power. Make a man a king and you give power over other men to their hurt. Don't like a king? How about a republic? Put men in power, make them governors, make them presidents, make them senators, representatives. What do you give them? You give them power. Power over other men for their hurt.

I know there's checks and balances in how we designed our system, and it's beautifully designed in many ways, but is it working? How well is it working? How satisfied are people? Look at the polls. Vast, vast majorities think our country's on the wrong track. Vast, vast majorities are unhappy with Congress, with the President, with the courts, the judges and justices. We see this, we know it. These people have power over us to our hurt. Well, this doesn't work. What about something else? Communism, socialism. Let's just get a dictator. But your dictator that you like might be the one who has power over me to my hurt. And my dictator that I like might have power over you to your hurt. Maybe an oligarchy, maybe some other form. It really doesn't matter the form. Those in power will have power to hurt other men. Think back to when Israel demanded a king. The prophet Samuel warned them what would happen: "He will take your sons and daughters to serve him. He will take a tenth of your produce, your belongings, your income", et cetera. He makes a very pointed statement in 1 Samuel 8 verse 17: "You will be his slaves". Power over others to hurt them.

We are those who believe in the depravity of man. And so we have to believe, I think, that sooner or later, those in power are ultimately going to use that power to hurt others. We can and we should create laws. And we can talk about the beauty of the rule of law and the rule of doing what is right. We can have checks and balances. We can have rights of property, human rights, whatever rights we want to have and proclaim freedom across the land. But in the long run, I think the preacher's right: it doesn't seem to matter — people in power will use it. People in power will want more of it, and they will use it to hurt others. The preacher saw this. Look around the world today. Look around the world throughout history. It's been true over and over and over again. This is life under the sun. The preacher doesn't say it here, but you can sense his conclusion that we've heard so many times before. This is vanity. It's pointless. It's futile.

But that takes us to my last point for this morning: **The only perfect, good ruler is God, through His Son, Jesus Christ.** Perhaps later today as part of your Lord's Day observance, take a look at Psalm 5. I've described it in the past as a declaration of dependence on God. A call to submit to Him, to obey His law. And ultimately, the psalm points us, I think, to rest in faith in the Son, God's work to save us from His very own wrath for disobeying His law. Submit to God. Submit to His rule. Our mindset has to change. Christians need to think of ourselves and Peter's calling us to this. He's told us: you're strangers, you're aliens, you're a dispersion of exiles. Think of yourselves more as citizens of the kingdom of Christ Jesus and less of the kingdoms of the world. Kingdoms of the world will ultimately be completely His. They're not there yet. They are under His authority to be sure. but He does allow them for now to continue to exist, to fulfill His purposes until He comes, to restrain evil, to discipline. Men are sinful and they don't do that well, but we live under His rule.

And if we think about this, then it matters less and less, I think, what the government is or what the government does, whether it's ruled by a king or a president or a mob democracy, because we can obey with a clear conscience any non-sinful commands that are given to us. And we can disobey with a clear conscience any sinful commands that are given to us. So we can serve the king or a ruler, whoever he or she is. We can pray for the peace and work for the peace of our country for its betterment, and we should. But what's our ultimate motivation in doing so? I want the good of the country. I want to live in a good country. But

what do I really want? I want the church to grow. I want the kingdom of Christ to expand. I want it to grow and prosper. Pray for the peace of the city so that the church, the people of God, might benefit from that. Pray for the good of the country so that Jesus Christ might be freely preached to sinners who are going to hell no matter how good or how bad their earthly human government is. We could have the best government on earth. We prayed for Aruba this morning. It's one of the best-run Caribbean nations. Unlike so many others, it's relatively prosperous, healthy, and yet human trafficking abounds. Christianity is just a nominal thing. Whatever's going on in the earthly realm, I want the freedom for the church to grow and prosper so that those around us might hear God's law, understand the seriousness of it for them, and be convicted of their sin so that they might repent turn in faith to Christ, the one who took the penalty of sin for all who believe.

Look, I value, deeply value the freedoms that we have in this country, and I hope that they last, and I hope that they endure. But the freedom that I value beyond all others is the freedom to worship God according to His word, the freedom to share the good news of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And that worship doesn't mean just gathering together here on Sunday morning. Remember again that Dutch Reformed Church: getting rid of the deacons is a danger to worship itself. The idea of worship has all of life, the service we do to God, love of God, love of neighbor. I want the freedom to love my neighbor as God has called me to love my neighbor. It may take obeying laws that maybe are not sinful, that I don't like, or submitting to leaders I don't particularly care for, and if I must do that to retain those freedoms in Christ, I feel like I gotta do it. I'm not gonna like it. But in the end, do I treasure more than my own likes and dislikes the freedom that I have in Christ's kingdom? Do I treasure more the opportunity to obey my heavenly eternal King so that I might glorify Him and enjoy Him even in this futile, frustrating life under the sun?

Let me pray for us.

Lord our God, sometimes Your word is difficult. It's difficult to hear. It's difficult to envision putting it into practice. But as we saw from Your servant Abraham this morning, sometimes our faith calls us to do things that seem very strange and odd to us. Help us to be wise. Help us to be those that pursue the peace and prosperity, the benefit of the places in which we live, but also pursue with even more zeal the kingdom of Christ and the bringing of those who have yet to come into that kingdom, who need to hear the good news of the gospel. May we be zealous for the kingdom of Christ. You have told us, "Seek first the kingdom of God. and its righteousness, and all these things will be added to us". May we pursue that in faith, trusting in You, trusting in Your goodness, trusting in Your providence, trusting in Your care for us in the midst of even the most difficult and trying times. For You are our God, and we are Your people. And this is possible because of Jesus. So we pray these things in His name. Amen.