

“LIVING WISELY IN A FALLEN WORLD”

In the past few sermons in this series on Ecclesiastes, we have seen how the Preacher repeatedly calls us to face up to the harsh realities of this life under the sun. This is the essence of wisdom for the Preacher: to face up to the facts. He has told us that we have to accept the fact that we are not going to be able to straighten out the things in our lives that the Lord has chosen to make crooked. He has said that we have to live with the fact that all people, including ourselves, have a corrupted nature. And in the passage that we are studying today, he tells us about another aspect of life in this world that we need to face up to. In these verses, the Preacher considers how the corruption of human nature has affected the power structures of this world. We need wisdom if we are going to be able to navigate a course through the challenges that this aspect of life under the sun presents for us. And there are two things that this passage teaches us about how to live wisely in a fallen world. First, *it teaches how to deal wisely with people in positions of power*. And second, *it points us to the ultimate reality that needs to dominate the way we look at this world*.

There are several things that we can learn from this passage when it comes to dealing with people in positions of power. The first is the way that it reminds us that *the systems of human power in this world have been ordained by God*. The Preacher says, “Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him.” Now it is true that the Preacher wrote these words from an Israelite perspective. The king of Israel was, at least nominally, one of God’s people. But the Scriptures also tell us that all of those who serve in positions of

political power have been given their authority by God. Jesus made this very clear when he was on trial before Pilate, saying to him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” [Jn. 19:11] And the apostle Paul makes the same point in Romans 13, where writes that the governing authorities that exist have been instituted by God. And this is particularly interesting when we consider that, for Paul, the governing authority was the Roman Empire, a pagan empire. In fact, the Roman emperor at the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans was none other than Nero, who would prove to be a ruthless persecutor of the Christian church.

The reason why Jesus and Paul said such things is because they knew that there is only one supreme authority over this world: the Lord. And because this is true, it follows that all of the authorities on this earth have been given their authority by God. In fact, they are the instruments through which the Lord exercises his authority over his world. And this is true even when the governing authorities do not fear God. This is something that today’s Christians need to remember. God has given legitimate authority to civil governments. And this remains true even when we do not agree with the policies of those whom the Lord has placed over us. This is the reason why we are called to submit to them, as Paul says in Romans 13.

The second thing that this passage teaches us about dealing with people in positions of power is that *these positions are populated by sinful people*. As the Preacher says, the king “does whatever he pleases.” Notice how realistic the Preacher was in saying this. He knew that Israel’s king was not a law unto himself. He knew that the king was subject

to God's law. But he also knew that people in positions of power do not always submit to the law. They sometimes use their power to go above the law. We have a prime example of this in the reign of David, whose actions in the scandal with Bathsheba were in outright defiance of the law of God. This is the sort of thing the Preacher is talking about when he speaks of man having power over another man to his hurt.

The third thing that this passage teaches us about dealing with people in positions of power is that *God's people need to exercise caution in how we deal with powerful people.* It is not always safe to resist people in positions of power. In the words of the Preacher, "the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, 'What are you doing?'" There is a fine line for us to walk here. We have to be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves. On the one hand, the wise person treats powerful people with respect. He does whatever he can to avoid offending them. In the Preacher's day, this meant that a wise counselor needed to be careful not to storm out of the king's presence when his advice was not taken. It meant being very careful about questioning the king's policies.

On the other hand, we do need to look for appropriate ways to confront the evil decisions that are made by those in positions of power. But we need to be very careful about how we do this. It is a dangerous business to oppose a king. As the Preacher says, look for the proper time and the just way. We see an excellent example of this in the story of how the prophet Nathan confronted David about his dealings with Bathsheba. Nathan did not go into the throne room with all guns blazing. He took a much more subtle approach, an indirect approach. I think this is the sort of thing the Preacher is

talking about here. We need to learn the art of being indirect. As Emily Dickinson writes in one of her poems:

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind -

There is real wisdom in this. We would do well to keep it in mind whenever we are confronting another person with the truth. And we especially need to remember it when we are thinking about questioning the decisions and policies of those who have power over us.

Now, in some senses, the things that the Preacher says in verses 1-9 may not seem to be very applicable to us. We do not live under a monarchy or a dictatorship. We live in a democracy. We elect our leaders by popular vote. Furthermore, there are considerable checks and balances in our political system that provide at least some degree of protection against the abuse of power. We should be very thankful for these things. Nevertheless, the insights contained in these verses are still relevant for us. For one thing, I think it is safe to say that Christians in America need to be constantly reminded of our duty to respect and submit to our governing authorities. Our need for this reminder becomes abundantly clear when we stop and listen to the way we often talk about our President and other elected officials. We are far too quick to follow the example of those popular media personalities who speak of our nation's leaders with words of disdain and

disrespect. At the very least, we should all agree that it would be good for us to cultivate the habit of always referring to our president as “President Obama” and not simply as “Obama.”

For another thing, we would be wise to take more care in how we go about voicing our opposition to the policies of those who govern us. Surely it would serve us well in many instances to take more time to consider the situation and to think more carefully about the proper time and the right way to respond to it. I don’t know about you, but that is not my first inclination when I hear about a policy with which I disagree. Most of us are probably too quick to speak. It seems that one of the side effects of democracy is to cause us to forget the fact that politicians, even politicians that we elect, really do have power. The words of the Preacher show us that it may not always be prudent to be rash in speaking out against our elected officials and their policies. Perhaps there are times when it would be wise for us to take more time to look for the proper time and the just way.

This brings us to the second thing that this passage teaches us about how to live wisely in a fallen world. *It points us to the ultimate reality that needs to dominate the way we look at this world.* It tells us that the wise person always remembers that the Lord has appointed a future day of judgment. Now it is true that there is no explicit mention of the final judgment in these verses. However, there is no doubt that the day of judgment is the reality to which the Preacher’s words in this paragraph ultimately point. What else could the Preacher be talking about when he says that it will be well with those who fear God, but that it will not be well with the wicked?

The paragraph begins with the Preacher telling us about an observation that he has made about the wicked. And note that verse 13 makes it clear that the “wicked” are those people who do not fear God. We tend to think of “wicked” people only as the most notorious sinners, but that is not the viewpoint of the Preacher. The wicked people of whom he speaks in this passage are people who regularly went to the temple, the holy place. They were outwardly religious. But their faith was not genuine. In New Testament terminology, the wicked are all of those who do not have a living faith in Christ.

The Preacher’s observation about the wicked is simply this: wicked people often seem to get away with their wicked deeds. The sentence against evil deeds is not executed speedily. Even when the wicked die, people say all kinds of nice things about them. How many times have you been to a funeral for someone who never showed any sign of having a living faith in Jesus Christ and heard people say over and over what a good person he or she was? Now I am not saying that we have to deny the fact that we can usually find something nice to say about most people. But my point, and the Preacher’s point, is this: where is the justice? When will people have to answer for their lust, their laziness, their pride, their blasphemy, their slander, their fits of anger, their materialism, their dissensions, their jealousy, their drunkenness, not to mention all of the things that they should have done but failed to do? When will there be justice?

As the Preacher reflects upon the fact that evil often goes unpunished in this life, he notes how this often causes the wicked to become hardened in their sin. A person

commits the same sin a hundred times, yet no punishment ever comes. This leads him to conclude that God is not all that worked up over his sin. This is how the human mind works. The first time that you do something that you know to be wrong, you are probably going to be pretty worried about getting caught. But when you have done this thing multiple times without even coming close to being caught, you are not going to be all that worried anymore. Delayed judgment causes us to let down our guard. But it is a grave mistake to think that God's patience proves that he thinks lightly of sin. His wrath is being stored up moment by moment. Who knows when the cup will be full? As Charles Bridges puts it, "Who knoweth but he may be at this moment exhausting the last drop of the appointed patience of God?" [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 199] God is just. His justice will be meted out. In the end, it will most assuredly not be well with the wicked.

While the Preacher says that it will not go well with the wicked, he expresses his confidence that it will go well with those who fear the Lord. The concept of 'fearing God' appears frequently in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament Wisdom literature. The fear of the Lord is essentially a synonym for biblical faith. To fear God is to fear what would happen to you were it not for God's gracious promise of provision for the forgiveness of your sins. To fear God is to be afraid of offending God. It is not a slavish fear. It is a childlike fear, like that of a child towards a responsible and loving parent. It is a fear that has love in it. And because of this, genuine fear of God reorganizes a person's life. It causes you to see that you cannot go on living for yourself. It is a fear

that is brought about in response to God's grace. It cultivates a sense of gratitude that causes you to want to live to please God. This is what the Bible means when it talks about fearing God. And the Preacher says that if you fear God, it is utterly impossible that it will not be well for you.

It will be well for those who fear God, but it will not be well for the wicked. This is undoubtedly true. God says it over and over again in the Scriptures. But it is a truth that we have to accept in faith, because it is a truth that will not be made evident until the day of judgment. This is why the wise person always keeps the day of judgment in mind as he makes his way through this life. The day of judgment hangs over all of us like a specter, and it does so whether we are aware of it or not. It is the end towards which every human life is being directed. Those who lose sight of this will be ensnared by the deceitfulness of sin. They will conclude that delayed judgment means the absence of judgment, and they will ruin themselves forever. We have to realize that we will reap what we have sown in this life. The man or woman who does not fear God in this life will have much to fear on the day of reckoning. They will reap the just judgment of a holy God. But those who walk through this life in the fear of the Lord will have nothing to fear when they stand before the throne of judgment. The requirements of God's justice have been fully satisfied for them in Christ, and they will reap the blessing of an eternal inheritance in Christ's kingdom.

This is essentially what the Preacher has been telling us all along. The ungodly look for their happiness in this world, a world of vanity, a world that will not last. But the

people who fear the Lord live out their days in this vain world under the firm conviction that it really will be well with us. Despite all appearances to the contrary, we believe that our God is just, and we believe that his good purposes for his children cannot fail. We walk by faith, not by sight. In the words of Richard Sibbes,

“We must not look at things in their confused state, but in the outcome. Look upon Joseph in prison, and here in horrible scandal. Where is God’s providence watching over the poor young man? O but now look at him next to Pharaoh... Consider Christ arraigned before Pilate and crucified; here is a great scandal, but stay awhile. See him at the right hand of God ruling, and all principalities and powers subjected to his feet (Eph. 1:21). Thus the Word teaches us not to look upon things only in the present, but to see the outcome when God directs all things to a sweet end.” [*Voices from the Past*, 333]