

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Fifteen): Deference

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The Old Testament is divided into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Writings are sometimes called the Wisdom Books. Within the Wisdom Books, including Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, seeking wisdom is emphasized as a major guide to a well-lived life. Proverbs 4:7 advises, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.” As we proceed through Ecclesiastes 8 and 9, we are learning that, as important as wisdom is, it is not the answer to each of life’s problems. Even wisdom has its limitations, and there are reasons for this.

Ecclesiastes 8 continues the subject of the importance of wisdom in dealing with the relationship problems that invariably arise during the course of life. The chapter begins by stating that wisdom is a valuable virtue in transforming an individual for good. Its goodness is illustrated with the statement that “it makes the face shine.” “Shine” appears to imply a person smiling in pleasure at what is accomplished using wisdom.

It is easy to recall a specific time we received a great deal of pleasure in solving a difficult problem by using a singular bit of wisdom. But the context of Solomon’s statement suggests a much broader application, a more general sense of well-being welling up from within due to consistent use of wisdom in daily life.

After this, the flow of the chapter quickly turns to the specific subject of the wisdom of deference. It focuses on dealing with those in authority over us, especially the king. To understand this more broadly, it will be helpful to analyze this so that we do not limit deference to the king. Christians must defer to others too.

This subject coordinates beautifully with Romans 13:1-7 and other passages in the New Testament. The apostles Paul and Peter make clear that God expects His children to be humble before all, taking care not to give cause for offense regardless of whom we are before. Giving deference must not be reduced to mere clever manipulation to make a point.

We always need to take God’s involvement in His creation into account, as He is its sovereign Ruler and we are pilgrims in a land that is not ours. It is almost as though a Christian is a guest. Therefore, we are to treat with preferential kindness even those who falsely accuse us.

It is good to remember that the counsel that follows is given to those who have made the covenant with God. When Ecclesiastes was written somewhere between 1000 and 900 BC, it was directed at all Israelites, as they were born into the existing Old Covenant relationship. By way of contrast, each of us has been called and must make the covenant with God individually. God is not now working directly with the descendants of the nation of Israel to whom this counsel was originally given, but He is working directly with us as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). Thus, it is directed to us for our benefit.

Our Overall Responsibility

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 8:2, "I counsel you, keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God." The mention of God colors and lifts the matter of deference far above mere social rectitude, making it part of our preparation for His Kingdom. This charge addresses our overall responsibility to God and thus to human governing officials because Paul shows them to be God's agents in Romans 13. In this context, it is the king.

Our responsibility is stated as obeying the king because of our oath to God. An oath is a formal declaration to do or not do something. Synonyms include "vow," "pledge," "swear," or "promise." Oaths are serious business. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus counsels us not to swear at all because of our weakness in keeping them. In this particular case, one may even bear greater responsibility than normal because the oath is made to God.

This oath could be one of three possibilities. Exodus 24:7-8 shows Israel's pledge to obey God by keeping the Old Covenant:

Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold, the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words."

The second oath is the covenant we have made with God to be obedient to Him. Jesus Himself says in Luke 14:26-27:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

Whether or not we fully grasped it, at the time of our baptism and laying on of hands, we were pledging our lives and activities to faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

The third possibility is the least likely to apply. It is swearing before a judge during a courtroom trial to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth "so help me God." This used to be done with a raised right hand or with a hand on a Bible.

The sense of responsibility to obey God must be cultivated, despite the sometimes foolish, self-centered humans in between Him and us. Those people may have done something very damaging that directly affects us or someone we love. They may have spoken forcefully against God and His way. It is easy to feel oppressed by them because, in their unconversion, they have become enemies of God. Being self-controlled in such situations may even prove to be life-saving.

Giving deference is not a mere civil duty. Making the covenant with God and deferring to those in authority can become a difficult, sacred obligation. It becomes more difficult when we perceive their self-centeredness and feel oppressed by them but fail to see God and the working out of His purposes in the picture at the same time. It presents a situation where disciplined self-control may be absolutely necessary.

So, being before the civil authority is not merely a civil matter. It presents a situation that is a personal matter between us and the unseen God. We must firmly grasp that human nature is just below the surface in us; it always wants to regain its former enslavement of us.

Hold Your Temper in Check

In the next verse, Solomon writes, “Do not be hasty to go from his presence, for he does whatever pleases him” (Ecclesiastes 8:3). This advice calls on us to refine our behavior to be delicate, reserved, and careful so we do not appear obstinate when a difference arises between civil authority and us. Solomon’s counsel is that, if the king does not grant us what we desire, depart discreetly out of respect for his office.

On this verse *The Preacher’s Complete Homiletical Commentary* observes, “A wise man will avoid everything in thought, temper, and action tending to sow the seeds of sedition.” Another expanded on this thought by advising, “We must study, even while in his presence, to find the proper behavior for the occasion so as to not imperil either our safety or the general society’s.” *Study*, in this case, means “concentrate on” or “give attentive scrutiny to.”

The thrust of this counsel is that a person must be careful not to let his wounded pride build to such a passionate defense that it carries over into haughty disdain for the authority’s office. This can even expand to calling God into account for His “failure” to remove that person from his office. Such an attitude may sow the seeds of rebellion far and wide. It is a major flaw in carnal thinking that people often fail to consider the long-range effects of even a single sin, a clear example of this being Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden.

The King’s Power Is a Reality

Next, Solomon cautions in Ecclesiastes 8:4, “Where the word of a king is, there is power; and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” To a person with long experience of the Western world, the degree of acceptance called for by this verse is almost beyond belief! Our cultures value such a high level of freedom of speech that our “kings” are called into account in the public media virtually second by second! Every word they utter is parsed for secret meaning, and every phrase is analyzed until all aspects of possible meaning are mined for insight as to how to criticize them. Every leader is considered fair game. The principle of the “divine right of kings” seems to have been seized by those under authority!

We certainly live in a different age than that of Solomon. However, we must keep in mind who we are, who is giving this counsel, and why this counsel is given. We are dealing with God and His purposes, so the counsel fits these realities above all other considerations.

Two examples of the need for the wisdom of giving deference appeared in recent news broadcasts. The first involved a young woman stopped by a policeman for a minor driving infraction. She had either given a wrong signal as to which way she intended to turn or had, for some reason, given no signal at all. As the patrolman began questioning her, she suddenly became irate to the point that she needed to be restrained, arrested, and imprisoned. A few days later, she hanged herself in the prison cell. Nothing indicates that the patrolman mistreated her in any way.

The second incident occurred a few days later under similar circumstances. A patrolman stopped a man for a minor moving violation and asked the driver to produce his driver's license. The man at first merely hesitated but soon began expressing angry resistance. A second time the officer asked him to produce his license. Suddenly, the driver jammed the car into gear, stepped on the gas pedal, and began driving away. The patrolman shouted at the man to stop and at the same time drew his weapon. The man would not stop, so the patrolman fired one shot, hitting the driver in the head and killing him.

Both of these incidents escalated to high intensity within a few moments. There were no drawn-out arguments and no prior history between those involved, just a citizen confronted by a public authority figure whom the citizen heatedly refused to submit to. Their resistance to a simple legal request became their death sentence.

As humanists have risen to leadership in virtually every aspect of social intercourse of the Western world, self-centered disrespect has surged to the fore. Nevertheless, Ecclesiastes 8:4 continues to stand as a reminder of what Romans 13:1-4 confirms to Christians regardless of when they live: Rulers in their position of authority in society stand in the place of God to us because they are ordained of God. Despite the rapidly declining social conditions on earth, God still rules His creation. Therefore, He counsels us to give those in leadership within our nations, not merely respect, but some measure of reverence as well.

In addition to this instruction, Ecclesiastes 8:1-4 also contains an implied promise of favor to those who have made the covenant with God and are honestly and consistently striving to remain faithful to their responsibilities within it. Such a person is indeed wise because he understands the nature of his duties as a citizen. Thus this verse provides practical wisdom to pass through life smoothly. Such a person is thought to be an excellent citizen.

Four Reasons to Give Deference

The term "king" used in this context makes some avoid or completely overlook the broader issue involved in the subject of deference. Hardly any of us will ever directly be confronted by a literal king. However, all of us are under the authority of leadership where we are employed, in the home, at school, or for that matter, even as we are driving to do our shopping. The principles of wisdom given in terms of a king, then, may apply to situations in our lower-level social status. To understand the counsel better, we can substitute the term "leader," which is better suited to our lives.

Verse 4 begins an intriguing paragraph, as Solomon gives overall reasons why deferential respect is good counsel. It adds a note of sternness to Paul's words in Romans 13, making Solomon's counsel good and useful information for us. We might call it a series of common-sense reasons to prepare us for his conclusion in verse 17, rather than strictly spiritual reasons why being thoughtfully careful before a ruler, especially a stern one, is wise on its surface.

The first reason is the most directly spiritual, one we must consider highly important. People in positions of authority in society stand to us in the place of God because His Word clearly declares that they are ordained of God. Because God is involved, it should immediately suggest to us the reality of a greater purpose and power, and we should treat such authority figures with care. Therefore, with this advance warning, should we ever be put in this position, we must be respectful and on our toes.

A second general thought is suggested in verses 6-9, which we will expand on below. The idea is that we do not know the future, and we are virtually powerless even in controlling the present. Solomon wants us to take our limitations into serious consideration. I Peter 5:6-7 provides this similar sound advice: “Be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.”

A third thought is covered more thoroughly in verses 10-15. We are aware of grave injustices in this world, yet we can still enjoy the life God gives. We have to recognize that even if he grants our desire—for which we might be before the leader—though it may be important to us, will not change anything in society. This is a reality. What we desire is not the solution to all of mankind’s problems. Even if our desire is effective, it will change things only temporarily. He is not counseling us to abandon hope but to be willing to recognize the realities of life.

The fourth puts a cap on the entire circumstance: Since God is indeed involved, even the wisest person cannot find out all of His work. We must hold our expectations of accomplishment somewhat in check. In other words, be moderate in our expectations because we do not “see” things as God does. Compared to Him, we have severe limitations, and thus wisdom, even though using it is always good, may seem to have limitations.

It is also helpful to understand that Solomon’s common-sense reasons are better understood within the historical times and circumstances in which they were given. If we apply their spirit to our time, we will find they are practical and workable regardless of the era we may live in.

The Matter of Power

Before moving away from the teaching in verse 4 on power, we need to be aware of a truth about why deference is necessary when facing a king. The truth is that power is present in his office, and it is God-given. A similar statement appears in Job 9:12, where Job speaks of God’s attributes: “If He takes away, who can hinder Him? Who can say to Him, ‘What are You doing?’” Thus, deferring to the ruler may avoid his exercising excessive power to maintain peace.

We *must* be aware that God has indeed granted power to the ruler. The ruler’s responsibility is as the appointed enforcer of the nation’s laws. Historical logic demands that the power must be there because, without the power in the authority’s hands, existing laws would be merely advice. If the leader’s office has no power to exercise, respect for law diminishes, and the citizenry will ignore the laws. Such a scenario has happened repeatedly in history. We are experiencing an increase of disrespect for law in this nation as we move toward Christ’s return.

What should our understanding of law be? To clarify this reality of power, it may help to personify law in the person of the ruler. Yet, the law, unlike a man, never sleeps. It also never forgets, having a long, long memory. Also unlike a mere man, it has virtually unlimited power to reach out and snare a lawbreaker. It must be respected because real power resides in it because of God above.

A vivid biblical example of this involves David’s nephew, Joab, and his relationship with David. He treated Uncle David, the king, imperiously and rudely throughout most of his life. But like God, David, the holder of earthly power in Israel, remembered. Before David died, he left orders for Solomon, and cousin Joab was executed by the new king in short order.

Joab seemed to get away with his disrespectful attitude toward David and his office for a long time, but he eventually paid for it. Why did David have him put to death? Because in reality, Joab had shown great disrespect for God. Joab did not perceive where the power truly resided.

A View Beyond the Human King?

Ecclesiastes 8:5-8 adds this instruction about dealing with those in authority over us:

He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; and a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgment, because for every matter there is a time and judgment, though the misery of man increases greatly for he does not know what will happen; so who can tell him when it will occur? No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death. There is no discharge in that war, and wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it.

In these verses, the focus of deference appears to shift to facing a leader with a reputation for unusual discernment and perhaps stern, unbending judgment. Is the king here the Creator God or an earthly king? Even though Solomon is, in an overall sense, providing us wisdom about how we should approach an earthly king, he never completely loses sight of God, who stands unseen behind the earthly king's power. He seems to be giving the earthly king here a great deal more than the usual level of respect.

If it is God that he writes of, then it appears to make more sense because we can learn of the real power behind the throne. We can learn to fear God more deeply and readily by observing nature and applying to our lives what we discern there of His character. If we do this, we will see some of His attributes and come to respect them more deeply.

Does not God say that He upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3)? Careful and thoughtful observation of the natural world reveals the compelling, harmonious, and sometimes breathtaking beauty of the mind of our great Creator. It also at times displays His awesome and mysterious power that, almost like a machine, seemingly appears to move on inflexibly, not knowing or caring what it inflicts. Who can stop the weather from happening?

Everybody and everything gets caught up in God's movements. A blizzard, tornado, earthquake, flood, or drought seems unsympathetic about what or who is caught in its devastation. It is as if, once God's purpose is formed, nothing can turn it aside, despite human woes. These are displays of power that everyone should rightfully fear. Yet, the wise person will discern that God's purposes come to fruition slowly, so he patiently waits, having perceived that, behind all the outward appearances of harshness, there is good within it. Such a wise use of power can influence a human king.

Verse 7 appears to say that God, the great and awesome King, operates without regard for man's desire to know the future. Why is this good? Because not knowing the future with any certainty tends to keep man dependent on God. It makes faith in His love a necessity for his spiritual survival. When a person stands before a human ruler, he should keep his utter dependence on God in mind.

In verse 8, Solomon touches on death as perhaps God's ultimate power over man. When a man's time arrives, only God has the power to give him continued existence. The breath of life is in the hand of God, and if He allows this last enemy to grasp us, there is no escape. Solomon is reminding

us that God's rule of His creation is not helter-skelter but operated with order and specific, individual attention to detail. No man has power to retain life beyond his appointed time. There are no grounds on which a person can procure exemption. Rebellious opposition to God will not avail us. Deference is clearly the order of the day to the Christian.

The overall point of Solomon's sobering exposition is that the Creator God must absolutely be treated with the greatest of respect and reverence. The human king, who stands in God's place before us as His agent, should also be treated with a measure of the same respect. In his office, he shares in some aspects of the Creator God's governing power. We must learn that the human ruler does not have to consult us, his subordinate, for permission to carry out whatever judgment he makes in regard to us.

Back to the Future

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 8:9-13:

All this I have seen, and applied my heart to every work that is done under the sun:
There is a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt.

Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This also is vanity. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

This passage carries forward Solomon's thoughts on the use of power by a stern ruler who exercises his governing powers tyrannically. How might it affect those of us living by faith? Verse 9 poses a circumstance that may prove critical for us, as even now our rulers in this nation are growing ever more dictatorial, and there seems to be no waning of governmental tyranny in sight.

This thought leads Solomon into commenting on a situation in verse 10 that seems to echo the paradox explored in middle of chapter 7. Realities within a community do not always follow the patterns that we expect to be fair and just. The wicked are sometimes blessed with comfortable long lives and wealth, and are acclaimed as benefactors in the city. In contrast, the righteous are treated unjustly, suffering under the powerful wicked who bear rule over them. The persecutors grow stronger in their hatred while the righteous are pushed ever lower in the estimation of others.

Solomon is reminding us that occasions arise when a reversal of retribution and reward occurs. Wisdom is not the answer in every occasion. These reversals are undoubtedly happening in our nation at this very time in its history. Cruel, persecuting sinners are being acclaimed and rewarded, while those practicing God's way are persecuted in the courts by being jailed and heavily fined, and their reputations are destroyed for their holding fast in obedience to God's laws. It is no wonder that Solomon declares these injustices to be vanity. This situation will produce no good results.

Verse 11 confirms that, because the governing authorities do not exercise the powers of their office, they tend to encourage the growth, both in their intensity and number, of the injustices being committed by the evildoers. This ugly truth reveals the depravity of the human heart. If evil deeds

were swiftly punished, human nature would be deterred to some degree. However, the reality is that, because justice is often so painfully slow, people seem to get away with almost anything, even murder. Human nature eagerly follows the path of least resistance. If lawbreaking is not punished, it quickly proceeds to greater numbers and intensity.

We are living through such a time. Seeing God has not intervened to stop these injustices, people are taking advantage of His forbearance. How should we view this? We must look on His delay positively—as a merciful gift to us—giving us more time to repent, overcome, and grow. In addition, who knows how many more He will bring to repentance as He delays?

God clearly states in Exodus 34:6 that He is “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” We must respond by holding fast in our faith to the loving wisdom by which He always proceeds. Paul writes in Romans 2:4, “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (English Standard Version). The unconverted always abuse God’s patience by making it an excuse for immorality. Scoffers always abound among those who do not know God (II Peter 3:4).

There is no doubt the wicked want the “good times” to keep on rolling for them. However, beginning in verse 12, God assures us that there will indeed be a final righting of all the injustices present in this world. Even in verse 10, He gives a hint of this, declaring that the prosperous and publically acclaimed wicked will be buried and then forgotten. Their reputations are swallowed up in the grave along with their bodies and forgotten. Their names may indeed live on but only in infamy.

In verses 12-13, He strongly assures us that the righteous, though they also sin on occasion, will have their days prolonged, perhaps indicating everlasting life. But for the sinner who does not fear God, the future is bleak, like a shadow that vanishes when light disappears. Justice will be done. The wicked are not to be envied.

“Eat, Drink, and Be Merry”

Ecclesiastes 8:14-15 gives helpful counsel before concluding the chapter:

There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the works of the righteous. I said that this is also vanity. So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor for the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.

Solomon reminds us that, as life falls out for us, we frequently do not understand it. It may seem unfair because the evil are prospered and the righteous are persecuted. But he does not dwell on that. Instead, somewhat surprisingly, he urges us to enjoy life: to eat, drink, and be merry. He does the same at least three other times earlier in the book despite all the vanity “under the sun.”

This is neither a cynical nor resigned-to-one’s-fate acceptance of the “Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die” attitude. Notice that the last phrase of verse 15 asserts that these circumstances are a gift from God. In addition, he says in Ecclesiastes 2:24, “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, was

from the hand of God.” Therefore, this agrees with his earlier counsel that what is happening to us harmonizes with God’s purpose for us. So the times and circumstances we are living in are good for our preparation for God’s Kingdom.

Yes, there is vanity under the sun. Yes, we see a lot of injustice. But we have a lot of overcoming work to do, and there is joy for us in the ordinary activities of life, sharing fellowship with the people of God. While we are involved with all our heart in these things, God is nourishing and sustaining us as He prepares us. Thus, there is even reason to celebrate. God is calling on us to rejoice.