

The Word of the King is Supreme
Ecclesiastes 8
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Read Ecclesiastes 8

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

Do you all know the name Anthony Bourdain? You should know him as a former chef who became an author then a travel TV host. You may know that he took his own life two years ago. I recently watched a documentary about his life called *Roadrunner* (not recommending it since there's a lot of bad language). It showed that he wrestled with a lot of demons throughout his life, apparently, having kicked a heroin habit and struggling with divorces and depression. I'll never forget one scene, though. He became a father a bit later in life, in his 50's. Reflecting on that, he said, "You know, my whole life, I was like a kid with my nose pressed against the glass, wondering, you know, 'What must it be like to have a kid and a normal family and stand in the backyard with this silly apron, you know, barbecuing burgers?' When I find myself doing that, I am, like, ridiculously, stupid happy... I travel all over the world, I see all these amazing things, but I'm never happier than when I'm standing in the backyard being, like, TV dad, because I feel normal."

I don't know if Anthony Bourdain ever read Ecclesiastes or not, but my mind immediately started connecting a lot of dots between his life and this book: here was a man who was trying to figure out life, often frustrated over the senselessness of it, but he got to explore and experience all kinds of things. A lot like our author, Solomon. And as you heard in the quote, some of his best times were just eating, drinking, and enjoying a simple life with his family, which is what Solomon comes back to about every other chapter, including the one we are studying this morning. If Anthony had read Ecclesiastes or other parts of the Bible, I think he would have seen hope beyond the senselessness and vanity of life, and perhaps found some solid things to stand on when his life crumbled and he saw no other choice but to take his own life. He came to some of the same conclusions as Solomon, I wish that he had come further - maybe he would have seen his life as a gift from the Lord and chosen to find meaning in his Creator.

Our text today is going to commend us to think and act in three ways, as we strive for wisdom and joy in different areas. The first nine verses deal with our response to our governing authorities,

I. Commending Obedience When the King is Supreme (vv. 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.

We read Solomon's admonitions to obey the king, not to stand in an evil cause that would bring his displeasure, and not to question his authority in the light of the fact that he was king of Israel when he wrote this. That's generally known as being blatantly self-serving, right? But I think Solomon meant that any king should be obeyed, for both theological and practical reasons. And he would generalize or universalize his commands to anyone living at any time under any lawful authority, whether that's a king, an Emperor, a Tsar, a tribal Chief, a Prime Minister, or a President. Why do we obey the governing authorities? Because of our obedience to God. Verse 2 says, "*Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.*" 1 Peter 2:13 broadens that idea: "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.*" Romans 13 was our Responsive Reading. It also speaks to this, as verse 1 says: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*" Then verse 6 says very directly, "*for the authorities are ministers of God.*" If God has instituted all governing authorities and they are functioning as His ministers in some sense - in keeping order in the world, controlling the chaos that would result from anarchy and lawlessness - we would do well to obey them as a sign of our obedience to Him. Some people would object and say, "that's only telling us to obey godly government." No, Peter and Paul lived a time when Nero was killing Christians; we don't wait for "godly government" before we obey, we obey the government that God has given us.

Verses 3-5 remind us that "*the word of the king is supreme,*" not to be questioned, and that obeying him will keep you from evil. Of course, there are times to disobey an authority, from a President on down to a teacher or a parent: when they are asking you to disobey the higher law of the King of the Universe. In Acts 5:29 Peter and the apostles told the Jewish council that was charging them not to teach about Jesus: "*We must obey God rather than men.*" They were willing to accept the consequences of their disobedience to the authorities so that they obeyed their true king. There may come a time when we engage in civil disobedience. If the government is ordering you to sin or to worship another God, you resist. But there must be a clear law of God at stake, we don't disobey because we don't like the governor or the president or because we don't want to pay taxes.

I don't want to get too political, but we need to talk about respecting our authorities as well because I believe that's part of this discussion. Romans 13:7b says, "*pay... respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*" 1 Peter 2:17 sums it up: "*Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*" I would say the same thing to people who are in both parties and Christians on all sides of the political spectrum - if you dishonor your government leaders, you should repent. If you insulted Bush or Trump, you should repent; if you insulted Obama or Biden, you should repent. Christians should not be chanting "Let's go, Brandon!" which is a sly way of saying a very rude thing about our current President. Even if you didn't vote for him, you owe him your respect and obedience. Now, we should intelligently know what we agree and disagree with about our leaders, but personal attacks are completely inappropriate. Dissent, speaking out respectfully against his policies, that's fine. Prayer is even better, as 1 Timothy 2:1-2 says that "*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions.*" Before you criticize a leader, stop and ask whether you've prayed for that person. Whatever government God has given us, we are to respect it and submit to it as we recognize that we are citizens of the heavenly kingdom first, and our earthly country second.

The second section sees Solomon

II. Commending the Fear of God Even When the Wicked Thrive (vv. 10-14)

¹⁰ Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. ¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. ¹² Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God. ¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

How many of you have been to a funeral of someone that you knew who was not a good person, didn't have a lot of redeeming qualities, but people got up and said how great he was and how much they miss him? I actually found an instructional article online called "How to Write a Eulogy for a Disliked Person."¹ It advises that if you are called upon to speak at someone's funeral who was not a good person that you don't lie, but that you be vague and put the best spin on it. For example: "I've known Jack most of my life. We didn't always get along – in fact, I suppose we had more conflicts than times of harmony. Jack always believed he was right – that his way was the best way. He tended to march to the beat of a different drummer. Jack had a great sense of humor. It wasn't always for mixed company, but he loved to tell jokes." I just hope that you and I are not put in that position. In verse 10, Solomon says he hates when he sees the wicked praised, that it's vanity.

It's one thing for a wicked man to get away with things in life, but he will not get away with it after death. Verse 12-13 remind us that God will ensure that those who fear Him will have it go well for them, while the wicked will not have it go well. But, Solomon says that the problem with people getting away with things in this life is that other people look at that and think they are free to commit evil– that's what verse 11 is referring to – "*because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*" I remember taking some teens on a youth group trip many years ago and we stopped at Ron John's surf shop. One of the guys bought a hat, but then exchanged it with another one without checking with a store clerk, and just walked out of the store. No one stopped him, so when his buddy heard about it, he thought, "I could probably steal a hat and no one would see." And that's why I got a call in my room at 11:30 at night from Ron John's security team, it didn't work out as well for the 2nd kid. But when people think others have gotten away with evil, they think they're free to engage in it as well.

We see that truth in the criminal justice system, but also in a more cosmic sense, in people not taking God and His justice seriously. They think that because sinful people get away with their wickedness before God, that He doesn't really care and does not bring justice. But we have to constantly be assured that God will bring all things to account. Psalm 73 is the classic passage where a man says that he is looking around at the wicked prospering, that they live in luxury and can hurt whoever they want and get away with it. They even taunt God: "*How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?*" (v. 11). And the author of the Psalm, whose name was Asaph, says that he felt that "*in vain have I kept my heart clean*" (v. 13); he was depressed that a holy God would allow the wicked to flourish and the righteous to suffer. But eventually, halfway through the Psalm, he goes to church, into the sanctuary of God, and remembers God's promises that the wicked will be judged at a time of His choosing, and that the righteous are held in His hand and will be received into glory. It's a beautiful Psalm, a great reminder of the truth of God's justice and mercy no matter how life appears.

¹ <https://www.theeulogywriters.com/how-to-write-a-eulogy-for-a-disliked-person.html>

Our final verses are about

III. Commending Joy Even When We Can't Understand God's Ways (vv. 15-17)

¹⁵ And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Solomon returns to his oft-repeated advice that finding joy in eating, drinking, and laboring will help you make the most of this vain life under the sun. We'll be exploring this idea even deeper in next week's text, so I won't spend much time there (come back next week). This section is ultimately about Solomon throwing up his hands and saying that he doesn't really understand life; he doesn't really understand injustice or wisdom, and he especially does not understand God's ways. He says three times in the last two verses, "*man cannot find out.*" As Ray Stedman summarizes, "Life is too complicated, too vast, too filled with conflicting elements for anyone to figure out all the answers."²

That's not to say that we turn our brains off and don't even try to understand, as we saw in an earlier sermon that wisdom is more advantageous than ignorance. But it's worth repeating that human beings can't know about God, can't find out about God's ways without God first revealing Himself to them. You can't just set about exploring the world, the laws of the universe, and the things that you can see and experience, and then expect to understand who God is. Now, Romans 1 says that we all have a knowledge of God impressed on our hearts, "*His eternal power and divine attributes have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made*" (vv. 20-21). We call that general revelation or natural revelation. But we would not know anything specific about God's character, His omnipresence and omniscience, and especially His plan of salvation without His written word. God is knowable to the extent that He reveals Himself in Scripture. It's one of the reasons that we cling to the doctrine of "Sola Scriptura" and defend the Bible and its inerrancy against its detractors. Without the Bible and the Holy Spirit's guidance, we have no solid foundation for spiritual knowledge and faith, we're only guessing; "*man cannot find out*" on his own.

Conclusion

One of the things that the Bible records, all four Gospel writers record it, is that when Jesus had been sentenced to die by crucifixion by the Roman authorities, they hung an inscription above his head on the cross that read "*King of the Jews.*" John records that the chief priests of the Jews wanted Pilate to change it to "*This man said, 'I am King of the Jews'*" because they did not believe that Jesus was any kind of King. But Pilate kept it as written. Maybe he wanted to defy the Jewish leaders after they pressured him to condemn Jesus when he had found Jesus innocent and wished to release Him. When Pilate had asked Jesus straight out, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*", Jesus had answered, "*My kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:33, 36). Jesus was not the elected King of Israel, but He was the spiritual King of Israel, the descendant of David who sat on the throne.

And the Scriptures remind us that that is not all He was – He is not merely King of one nation, He is the King of all kings. The greatest King exalted and ruling over every earthly kingdom. 1 Timothy 6:15 reminds us that our Lord Jesus Christ is the "*blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and*

² Ray Stedman, *Is This All There is to Life?* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1999), p. 115.

Lord of lords, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion.” Revelation 17:14 has a picture of the future where the kings of the world will join with the beast and “they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful.”

So the question is: do we want to be the king of our lives, sitting on the throne of our own hearts, or are we willing to surrender to the true King? We don't decide that God is the King over all creation, we don't elect Jesus to be the King of kings – they are whether we acknowledge that or not. But do we live our lives in submission to them? The King of kings does whatever He pleases, whatever He wills. The big question is: will we keep the King's commands? If we do, we will be a whole lot less concerned with having our own way and fulfilling our lives, seeking self-actualization and the things that make us happy; we'll be a whole lot more concerned with whether we are doing what our King has asked us to do. We will think more seriously about how we fulfill our roles as His ambassadors (2 Cor. 5) and His hands and feet in this world.

And the ultimate act of submission to the King of kings is to recognize that only He can save us. Only Jesus' life of perfect obedience combined with His substitutionary death on the cross can make the peace with God that our sins demand. Otherwise, we are enemies of God, separated from His kingdom because of our sin and rebellion. We are traitors to the great King who need to be pardoned and given mercy, so He sent His Son to make peace on our behalf. That peace was achieved at the price of His own blood, it cost Him His life. But He willingly gave it up for us because of His great love for us. Imagine that – a King who knows that His subjects will never be able to submit to His rule and find peace on their own, so He draws them in by sacrificing His own Son. What wondrous love is this?

And what Solomon said in verse 5 about obeying earthly kings, *“Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way,”* is more true about obeying our heavenly King, Psalm 119:2-3 – *“Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in His ways!”* Despite Solomon's laments that *“man's trouble lies heavy on him”* (v. 6) and that *“no man... has power over the day of death”* (v. 8), there is a way to live life that brings joy and holds no fear of death: in submission to our great King, who created us, who redeemed us, who adopted us into His family, and who loves us with an everlasting love. As our new song, “Grace,” says: *“Your grace that leads this sinner home / from death to life forever / And sings the song of righteousness / By blood and not by merit / Has called my heart to enter in / the joy of Your salvation.”* Amen.

Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26 - *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”*