



God and Government

SERIES: *Searching for Satisfaction in an Unsatisfying World*

A few weeks ago I drove from Foster City into Burlingame because I had a coupon for a free lunch at a restaurant on Burlingame Avenue. It had been a while since I'd been down there so I'd forgotten how hard it is to find a parking space. I drove up and down the streets looking for a space. Finally, I drove into a parking lot where I thought I had a space. I took off my seat belt and prepared to park when another car took the space instead. Frustrated, I backed out of the lot and got back on Burlingame Avenue. I didn't drive more than about 100 yards before a policeman on a motorcycle stopped me. When he told me that he was giving me a ticket for not having a seat belt, I was pretty upset. While he was right, I had failed to put my seat belt on after leaving the lot, I thought this was a senseless ticket. First of all, I was only going about 10 miles an hour. Second, I was in that position in the first place because there was no place to park in that blasted town! Third, he was about to mess up my great driving record. And finally, I was just a poor pastor trying to save five bucks by using a coupon, and now he was about to make this a very expensive lunch!

Joking aside, I was really upset. I'm normally nice to policeman, but I just felt this was over the top, and I let him know it. But he went back to his car, wrote out the ticket, and came back. When he asked for my signature I was still so upset that I asked him what would happen if I didn't sign it (I thought perhaps this could be a way to protest). He said that if I didn't sign it he'd have to arrest me. I said, "Where do I sign?" I could just imagine one of you driving by as I was being cuffed and placed in the back of a police car - for not wearing my seat belt!

I tell you that sad story because it brings up an important issue. It's an issue that whether we're conscious of it or not we deal with it every day. It's the issue of how we relate to our government; how we deal with those in authority over us in a civil context. There are a variety of opinions about this. There are those who are basically suspicious of any authority, including the government. They want less of the government involved in their lives. There are also those who look to the government to pretty much solve all their problems. If we could just pass these laws, or if we could just get the government to step up and help where they're really needed. And then there certainly are those of us who just don't think or care that much about this issue until they're stopped for not having their seat belt fastened, or until April 15 rolls around, or until they get a letter in the mail saying they have to appear for jury duty. Then they care. This issue pretty much affects all of us.

We're studying the book of Ecclesiastes. We've been looking at a section of that book where the Teacher is trying to examine and evaluate different aspects of our lives under the sun. He's observed how prosperity isn't always a good thing and adversity isn't always a bad thing. Last week he examined the human condition in terms of whether or not there is really

anyone who could truly be considered a good person. He observed that there is no one who is righteous and never sins. Now of course sinful people create sinful societies. And that's why the next thing he examines is the role of human government and our response to it. Maybe government is the answer. And so in chapter 8 the Teacher explores the role of human government in our lives.

I. Obey the government because of our oath to God.

He begins by saying that we should obey the government. Look at vv. 1-2.

"Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam. I say, 'Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God.'"

He starts by extolling the virtues of a truly wise person. Who is like a wise person? Who is like the person who really understands a matter; who really gets it; who really knows what to do in life? Now because of what he goes on to say, he's probably talking about the role of a wise person in relation to the leaders of the land, in this case in relation to the king. He may even be talking about the high value of a wise man who actually works for the king. And in v. 2 the Teacher begins to advise such a person on how to relate to the king. The first thing he advises is simply to obey, to keep the command of the king.

And he tells us why we should obey. Obey because you have an obligation to do so under God. This is what he means by, "because of the oath before God." This applies to us. Every citizen of the USA has taken an oath of allegiance to support the government of the United States. If you are a naturalized citizen you actually took an oath like that when you became a citizen. If you're a natural-born citizen you reflect that oath when you say the Pledge of Allegiance:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

This may be the kind of thing the Teacher is talking about when he refers to "the oath." One translation puts this, "Keep the king's command as though it were an oath unto God." This underscores the seriousness of citizenship, that, by virtue of sharing the blessings of government in a nation like ours, we're also responsible to obey the proper powers and laws of that government. It's a spiritual obligation. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 13:1-2, **"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God..."**

About 23 years ago I first saw the leaning tower of Pisa. It's really quite a sight, especially from the top. When I

went back about 15 years later it was under construction. It turns out this 180 foot tower was beginning to lean too much and would soon fall, creating a lot of damage. So engineers went in and installed underground cables to pull the tower towards the center just an inch or so. The work was successfully finished in 1996, but they don't let people climb up any more. This might help us understand why God establishes human government. Left to itself, because of the sinfulness of man, nations are like the leaning tower of Pisa - tilting towards catastrophe. In order to prevent total anarchy, God establishes governments to act like steel cables that hold a society up. The tower still leans; government can't make us perfect, but it does prevent total destruction. That's why I should have been wearing my seat belt. This is why we should obey government.

II. Don't rebel against the government because it has the right of force.

The second thing he says is found in vv. 3-4.

“Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.’ Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”

When he says, “Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter (bad cause),” he's talking about being involved in some kind of rebellion. He envisions a person rushing from the king's presence, finding others who are opposed to the king, and joining in a plot to overthrow him. He says don't do that.

And once again he gives us the reason - because the government has the power to compel us to obey; the leaders of a land have what we call the right of force. One good reason to sign the ticket was that he would arrest me if I refused! Once again, this reflects what Paul says in Romans 13:3-4. He says the law is **“a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.”**

No one uses the right of force like the IRS. When I took my first job as a pastor over 20 years ago, I was given the option, as all pastors are, to opt out of paying into the Social Security system. I needed the extra money so I filled out a form and opted out of the system. A few years later someone challenged me to look a little closer at the law. As I researched it, I discovered that the only reasons the law allowed you to opt out were if you had taken a formal vow of poverty or if you conscientiously objected to getting help from the government. I realized that as a point of conscience, I had to go back into the system.

So I notified the IRS of my situation and that I wanted to begin paying into Social Security again. I thought I was doing a good thing. I thought I was doing them a favor. I expected to get a letter commending me for being honest! Instead, I got a hefty bill for back taxes. I had to pay to get back in!

That's what the Teacher is saying here. He's saying, “Comply with the laws of the land because you're not in a position to argue. They have the authority to

penalize you. They have the right of force.”

But sometimes we flat out don't agree with what the government is doing. What do we do then?

III. Be prudent towards the government because we don't know or control what will happen.

Look at what the Teacher says next.

“He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, when a man's trouble is heavy upon him.”

Notice it talks here not just about obedience but the wisdom of knowing the proper time and procedure. The idea here is to be wise; to be prudent. My dictionary defines prudence as being “discreet” or being “careful to avoid undesired circumstances.”

Recently I saw the movie *John Q* starring Denzel Washington. It was about a guy whose son was dying of a heart problem. He needed a heart transplant to survive, but his insurance didn't cover it and the hospital refused to treat him without \$250,000. John Q was just a blue-collar factory worker who could never come up with that kind of money. So instead of letting his son die, he took the hospital hostage, threatening to kill if they didn't get his son a heart and do the surgery. He was even ready to kill himself so they could use his own heart! As much as we love that kind of gritty heroism, he didn't use a lot of prudence.

On the other hand, consider a man named Obadiah. Obadiah was a man who feared God, but he also happened to be a member of King Ahab's cabinet. Ahab was King over Israel and he was at best a compromiser. His wife, Jezebel, ran the show. How could a godly man serve in that government? Listen to what the Scripture says in 1 Kings 18:3-4, **“And Ahab called Obadiah who was over the household. Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly; for it came about, when Jezebel destroyed the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water.”** That's prudence. That's a guy who was able to stay a part of a sick administration because he was prudent, and he ended up as an influence for good.

I can't help but think of Dr. Billy Graham in this regard. He has been known the last 50 years or so as the President's pastor. He's advised men like Kennedy, Nixon, Ford, Bush and Clinton. He's gotten a lot of flack for identifying with some men other Christians didn't want to have anything to do with. He was uncompromising in his message, but prudent in his manner. It couldn't have been easy. I'm sure he wanted to blast a few of those guys! But because he was prudent he made a difference in some places nobody else would touch.

Another reason to be prudent is found in vv. 7-8.

“If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it.”

It's hard to know exactly who he's talking about here, but he's clearly talking about the limits of man. We don't know the future and ultimately we don't control the outcome of our lives. These are obviously things that are in the hands of God. He's saying we don't always know or control what God will do through our obedience.

I was reading Ray Stedman's message on this very passage and here is what he wrote about this as an example from his own life:

"As a young man in my twenties during World War II, I remember being faced with the very question of registration for the draft. At the time I was working for the railroad industry, which by its very nature allowed me to be deferred because that industry was essential to the conduct of the war. But as the war went on and I saw that my friends and all other young men of my age were enlisting in the service, I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable at that deferment. Eventually I joined the Navy. Although I was unsure whether I was doing the right thing or not, I felt I ought to join. What I did not understand or realize was that the action I took would open a door which gave me what was perhaps the greatest opportunity I have ever had to teach the Scriptures to those who were in desperate need of such teaching. I was stationed at Pearl Harbor, and through that great port there passed from time to time all the sailors of the Pacific Fleet, many of them Christian young men who had won others to Christ aboard their ships. Along with others, I had the opportunity to have great Bible classes, with hundreds of sailors involved. All this was opened up to me because I was a member of the United States Navy myself. Furthermore, I did not know that at the end of the war I would be granted the GI Bill of Rights, which would give me enough money to pay for my seminary training. In fact, it was rather remarkable that the time I had served in the Navy provided me with exactly the right amount to go through four years of seminary training; the month that I graduated from seminary the GI Bill ceased for me. I could not foresee all that, but God did. So it is possible that unexpected results will follow from obedience to what God has set before us to do with regard to government."

That's a great example of what the Teacher is saying. Isn't it great to know that, ultimately, our lives are in HIS hands? At times it might seem like others are in control, especially those in authority over us, but it just looks that way from our perspective. God is in control. Proverbs says, **"The plans of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD....The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps"** (Proverbs 16:1,9).

Some of you may be wondering if there ever is a time when we should stand up against our government. Many, of course, are wondering that right now as our President contemplates going to war with Iraq. We had a serious anti-war demonstration right up in the City yesterday. Others who live in countries where the corruption in government is rampant, and where the law protects only the rich and powerful, wonder about this kind of thing all the time.

IV. Fear God and enjoy life because despite the injustice around us in the end he will make things right.

This brings us to vv. 9-11.

"All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt. So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil."

The Teacher doesn't have his head buried in the sand. He sees that government doesn't always do its job, and he even sees that sometimes those in authority are the problem. He gives some examples of injustice.

First, he says in v. 9 there is the misuse of authority: **"Man lords it over others to his own hurt."** John Kenneth Galbraith put this very well when he said, "Under capitalism man exploits man; under communism it is exactly the reverse." He recognized the universality of evil and the corruption of all power.

Next, he says in v. 10 that it's the wicked who seem get praised. He had been to a funeral of some prominent government leader, a man whom everybody knew was a wretch and a reprobate, even though outwardly he appeared to be holy and righteous as he went in and out of the temple. But at his funeral he was being praised, exalted and glorified; none of his evil deeds were mentioned. That is evil.

Another example of injustice he mentions in v. 11 is the slowness of the justice system. We find abundant examples today of delays in justice which permit crime to increase and criminals to be encouraged. When justice is delayed or circumvented in any way, when judges turn loose criminals for technicalities when it is clear that they are guilty of outrageous crimes, this only encourages more crime. This is a clear picture of the evil that can be present in government.

This is a stinging but realistic assessment of how life appears to go for many people. So, what do we do? How do we respond to this? He tells us two things.

The first one comes in vv. 12-13.

"Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God."

Despite the injustice around us, he says we should fear God because in the end God will make things right. When the government tells us to do something contrary to the Word of God, fearing God means obeying him, despite the consequences. Jesus said to his disciples, **"And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."** (Matt 10:28). In God's eyes, what happens to our bodies is not nearly as significant as what happens to our soul. God is able to take care of his own. Those who walk in fear before God, which means to love, respect, obey and trust God, will be kept by him, regardless of what happens to their bodies. There is a clear implication here that God will judge the wrong in his own time. Though the king seems to get away with murder, God is watching; an accounting will be made. The promise is that the wicked shall not "prolong his days like a shadow." Shadows lengthen as the day goes on and the sun goes down. As the evil man nears the end of his day, the end of his life, that's all there is; there is no hope for him to lengthen his days beyond the grave because he doesn't have the eternal life that only God can give.

The second thing we're to do in light of the unfairness of life may come as a surprise. Look at vv. 14-15.

“There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.”

Despite the fact that life is oftentimes unfair, we shouldn't fret, but we should enjoy the simple pleasures of life that God gives us. Don't misunderstand this. This is not justification for living the philosophy, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." That philosophy is based upon the lie, the illusion that satisfaction comes from pleasure. If this book is teaching us any one thing it is telling us that's not true. Satisfaction doesn't come from happy, pleasant circumstances, where everything is going the way we like it. That's what the world believes. No, satisfaction and joy are gifts of God which can accompany even difficult and hard circumstances. True enjoyment, true contentment does not come from having everything the way you like it. It comes no matter what you are going through, as a gift from God, who is able to give you joy and contentment from the simple pleasures of life even in the midst of the pressures, the problems and the dangers of life.

This is what the apostle Paul meant in Philippians: **"I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need." What secret? He tells us: "I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me"** (Phil. 4:12). It is that inner strengthening, by a relationship with the Living God, which is the secret of joy and contentment, whether you are in need or whether you abound; the realization that a loving Father is working out strange and inscrutable purposes, which you cannot always guess at or estimate through the difficult problems and circumstances you're undergoing.

So, while we respect the government and the role it plays in our lives, we still put our real trust in God. He is the one who in the end will right every wrong, and he is the one who can bring meaning and real joy to our lives even amidst the unfairness and tragedies of life. That's what Jill was talking about earlier.

CONCLUSION

Meanwhile, what we need is wisdom. This is what the Teacher started out by saying, "Who is like the wise man? A man's wisdom illumines his and causes his stern face to shine." Only God can give wisdom like that. Listen to what Charles Bridges writes,

"The king's commandment--when to keep--when to resist--the right manner of keeping or resisting--this is sometimes a time and judgment calling for great discernment. It is not man's natural prudence that suffices. It is the wise man's heart--the heart enlightened by the knowledge of God and his will--the heart possessed by the Spirit of wisdom--here alone is the safe discernment."

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