

WHAT'S THE POINT?

the gospel according to Ecclesiastes

*“Wisdom in a Vain Society”
Ecclesiastes 8:1-15*

One very beautiful, heart-wrenching and personally encouraging chapter in the Bible is John 17. In that chapter, Jesus is praying for his disciples and then all future followers of Jesus. As he prays, you hear his heart for us. You can grasp the grand love of the Lord for us. But there's one line in that prayer that I've struggled with before, and I bet many of you have as well. In John 17:15, we read that Jesus said, “¹⁵I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”¹ Praise God that Jesus prayed that we would be kept from the control of Satan. But I've wondered before, “Why not just take us out of this world? Why couldn't Jesus have said, ‘As soon as they believe, take them to Heaven?!’”

That sometimes the wish that I have. As Solomon puts it, we live in a vain world. Under the sun, there are paradoxes and sins and depravity. What's the point of living in this fallen world? Then we get to the sermon text from last week and we read one of Solomon's conclusions. As he talks about trying to figure people out, he says that in his quest of understanding people, he's discovered two things: human beings are defiant against God and therefore finding a wise person is a rarity. In 7:29, he writes, “. . .**God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.**”² If you struggle to accept Solomon's conclusion, just look around at this world. Whether we're moral or immoral, we tend to do what we do apart from depending on God and realizing our need for him. So, instead of acknowledging him in all our ways, we turn to our schemes; our way of doing things.

If this is the case that the world is as vain as Solomon says and that people are as depraved as he says; what does this mean for the cultures in which we live? In other words, how are we to think about the societies, the countries, the cities in which we reside? And how are we to live in them?

Do you realize that we Christians in America are by-and-large an anomaly in Christian history? I think it would be accurate to say that over the course of 2,000 years, American Christians have experienced the least amount of persecution than anyone else. But even if that were not the case, we can probably safely say that American Christianity is definitely in the top tier of minimal persecution over the course of 2,000 years. This shouldn't surprise us *nor* should this make us feel guilty. Every good gift comes from God, and as Solomon wrote already, “¹⁴In the day of prosperity be joyful. . . .”³ With many laws finding their basis in Judeo-Christian heritage, it's no wonder that Christians have found it *easier* to live here than in any other society.

But at the same times, it seems like we've faced over the past couple of decades some changing of the tides. It's not that immorality didn't exist in America before that. There have been heinous sins like

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jn 17:15.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:29.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:14.

slavery, sexual promiscuity, domestic abuse, lynching, racism and more. But now it seems as though Christians don't feel their voice is as loud any longer or maybe they feel as though their voice isn't much respected. There doesn't seem to be much of a moral majority any longer. And Christians seem to scramble in election cycles to try to figure out what exactly they should do. Should they vote for this person or that person? Should they vote at all?

But not only in voting, Christians struggle to know how to engage the world around them. So many laws are different than they used to be. While many more view abortion as wrong today than even a few years ago, it's still practiced. Issues of sexuality and gender confuse us in how we should relate to society, too. Should we boycott that store or that cereal producer or that shoemaker or not? I personally faced some of this struggle a few months ago when the State of Michigan was evaluating the laws regarding allowing not only the bathrooms being opened to students who consider themselves transgender, but also locker rooms. As a father of five kids who are a part of the West Ottawa school district, that's concerning to me. I don't want my 12 year-old (or soon-to-be high school age) son taking showers with a girl. Nor do I want those similar scenarios for any children.

So, as these laws were being considered, I was struck with, "What am I supposed to do?" And I wasn't only thinking as a parent of my own kids, but as a Christian. Even before this scenario, I had been thinking about how Israelites in exile used to live. Jeremiah would even encourage the Israelites to ". . . **seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**"⁴ I thought at Joseph who didn't compromise his beliefs and yet he lived within the Egyptian culture – for their good. You could also think of Daniel who had a similar scenario standing up for the Lord yet speaking for the good of the kings who ruled over him. In these types of societies, there were heinous sins taking place. In Egypt, women weren't fully clothed. In Babylon, the Israelites are in captivity being squelched. Daniel's friends were put in a furnace! Daniel was put into a Lion's Den. And yet somehow, these people knew when to speak up while at other times they served.

How are we to respond in our world? That was the question that I've been faced with and continue to face? And we all face this. In my scenario, I spoke with the Superintendent of the district and also communicated with principals. But I also communicated my appreciation for them, too; and my desire to see good for the whole district. There's more encouraging things to the story, but I'll end at that because this sermon isn't about me. It's about God and his call to us in how we are to live in society.

Honestly, it would be easier if God just took us out of the world when we accepted Jesus. It'd be easier to run or flee. But if God took us out of the world, how would we follow Jesus in the world and show the world the wisdom of God in Christ? Solomon says that wisdom is a rarity, and the apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is the wisdom of God. As a result, if you're a follower of Jesus, then you have been gifted with wisdom and you are called to be transformed by the renewing of your mind and thus grow in a wise way of living.

So, I hope this sermon helps to encourage you with practical helps of living daily life in *this society* or whatever culture you move to. Christian, you've been given wisdom. And so the question for you today is "**Are you living wisely?**" To answer that question, we're going to look into the text and find three actions Solomon calls us to that reveals that wisdom resides in someone and is increasing. So, before we

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Je 29:7.

get into those three reasons, let's read the text together today from Ecclesiastes 8:1-15. Let's pray before we read it:

8 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. 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. 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. ⁵

Verse 1 of chapter 8 says, "Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?" In the context, Solomon is saying, "Who knows how to maneuver through this life?" Who knows when to act and when not to act? The scenarios like what I spoke of earlier fit in this poetic question of Solomon's. Solomon obviously wants us to yearn for wisdom because he then says that wisdom changes a person's countenance. Their faced is change. Hardness goes away.

Why does Solomon talk about a countenance change when we're going to talk about how to engage in society? Because people notice how your countenance looks! I don't think Solomon is merely using a word-picture, but actually affirming what the Scriptures teach about those who follow the Lord. Proverbs 15:13 says, "A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed."⁶ And one of my favorite verses is Psalm 40:3. It says, "**He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.**"⁷ Do you notice that the song is not heard? The song is seen! A wise person is someone who is transformed from the inside and comes out, being revealed even on the countenance of the individual.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 8:1–15.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Pr 15:13.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 40:3.

A wise person is valuable in society even before they speak! Personally, I don't think enough people think about this. If someone was talking to you in a monotone voice and said, "You have to get one of these. They're the best thing I've ever had." You would know they're deceiving you. What about you? Do you *love* the gospel? Do you *love* God? Do you rejoice at his goodness? How's your face? What does it speak to others when you sing to the Lord or when you study the Word or when you talk to others about God? The wise, those who have trusted in Jesus – who is the wisdom of God – get a countenance change! And not only that, they grow in discerning how to engage in the culture through words and actions. This is what Solomon is getting at here in chapter 8, and he essentially says, "If you're wise, you will first. . . ."

1. Trust God's providence by submitting to rulers (vv. 2-9).

This command seems to make no sense when you think that this world is broken and the people in it are sinful. Solomon's example that we saw last week was that everybody at least at some point in time has talked about someone else behind their backs. Well, if we can't trust anyone, then why should we submit to our authorities?

Of course, Solomon's specific example is that with submission to Kings, but I think that can be expanded here in context to government leadership. This fits Romans 13:1-2 that 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. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. . . .**"⁸

But we don't need to obey when they're enforcing imperfect laws, right? How can we submit to a wicked leader who doesn't care about Christianity? What if they're an atheist or Buddhist or something else I've never heard of? What if they're foolish? Here's where we get confused, right? How is a Christian to respond?

These are the questions on my mind. Even recently in reading in Daniel, I wondered how Daniel could say to Nebuchadnezzar that he wished that Nebuchadnezzar's dream was for Nebuchadnezzar's enemies and not for Nebuchadnezzar? Wasn't Nebuchadnezzar an enemy of the Jews? Do you hear what I'm saying? Or, think of Joseph. How could Joseph endure in a pagan and sensual Egyptian society? Now, as I say this, some could say, "But we have to stand up for what's right!" Exactly. But we also have to recognize that a sinful world is sinful. This is where wisdom comes in. And Solomon details what he means when he says that we are to "Keep the king's command." He gives us at least two reasons why we are to submit. And in the midst of this, he gives some qualifications of the submission. So, the first reason to submit to authority is because of the oath of God.

The ESV says we are to keep the king's command because of God's oath to him. The more literal translation is simply "because of the oath of God." This could mean God's oath to the king, like with God's oath to King David to preserve his throne. Or, this could be referring to the oath that God has required of servants to their king. I tend to take the second view. Therefore, there are two things we can learn from regarding this oath of God. First, by extension, God has required of all people to exercise humble submission to the governing authorities – like what I just read from Romans 13. Second, this "oath of God" speaks to the providence of God in all of life. Every authority has been placed by God, and

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ro 13:1–2.

every person is under the authorities that God has ordained. Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.”⁹ When you submit to authorities, you actually reveal your trust in God’s providence. As one man named Sean O’Donnell wrote, **“Everything is directed by ‘the secret stirring of God’s hand.’ So, then, insubordination to those in authority over you – teachers, parents, bosses, presidents, and others – shows an attitude of ingratitude and a mistrust in God”** (O’Donnell, p. 161). Solomon presses this idea by saying that we shouldn’t be hasty to go from the king’s presence. The idea here is one of disrespect. You’re quick to deny or turn away from the ruler. Now, why would you do that? Look at the next line in verse 3. There’s an evil cause. In other words, the king wants to do something bad and so you turn away from the king.

You could think that the king’s going to do what he’s going to do anyway, so what’s the point? So, you walk away. There’s a problem with this kind of quick-tempered response to authority. First, that shows disrespect to the authority that God has placed, but second, if you act this way, it gives you no opportunity to speak truth into the scenario. Look at the end of verse 3 again: “Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. ⁴For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, “What are you doing?” ⁵Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.”¹⁰

Do you hear the qualifier here? Clearly Solomon doesn’t think submission is a blind obedience to *everything*. If you are called to actually participate in the evil, you don’t do it. The apostle Peter affirms this in Acts 5:29 when he said, “We must obey God rather than men.”¹¹ But you could think, “But the rulers will never listen to us anyway. So, let’s just wash our hands of them! Well, Solomon affirms that the rulers can tend to do whatever they want because they’re supreme. Even in the American experiment where the Constitution is to be supreme, people still try to take that spot. What do we do in those scenarios? It seems to me that people either hide or they become obstinately vocal. Solomon brings up the vocal one. Who may say “What are you doing?” We have plenty of angry people in American politics, but it seems Solomon would call for a calm and wise demeanor. He says that there are those who keeps a command. Meaning, they generally follow the rulers and authorities. They’re obedient to the government and they don’t experience a lot of problems. A wise person wants to obey.

But when push comes to shove and there’s wickedness – they won’t participate in it. Instead, they’ll try to figure out when and how they can communicate. They don’t just spout off their tongue. They don’t yell loudest for all to hear. They consider the proper time and also the just or right way to do it.

You may hear this and you may say, “Oh, come on! They’ll never listen to that.” Well, maybe not, but the point isn’t just getting our way. The point is to shine forth the glory of God and then trust in the God who is sovereign over ruler’s hearts. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn’t get out of the fiery furnace, but God made his glory known.

If you struggle with this counsel, you’re really struggling with trusting the Lord. I know that questions can pervade the mind, and you can say, “Well, what about this? What if I get hurt? What if?” Yes, what if. But we’ve already learn that we need to submit because of the oath of God. Now, Solomon addresses our what if by saying we need to submit because God is worthy of our trust.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Pr 21:1.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 8:3–5.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ac 5:29.

Look at verses 6-9 with me again: ⁶For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. ⁷For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? ⁸No 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. ⁹All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt. ¹²

Yes, the problems are very troublesome to you and pains you to think about them, but there is a time and a way of going about everything. So, sometimes there needs to be a lot of care and wisdom in when to confront a ruler or even how one goes about doing so. Remember this. But when the times comes remember this: you are not guaranteeing your welfare in this world by doing the right thing. And, if the ruler puts you to death, remember he's going to die, too. No one can control their spirit. No one has the power over death. And war and wickedness will continue. Oh wait. No one has control over these things except for God! God knows the future. Jesus tells us to fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. And Jesus, through the resurrection defeated death!

So, if you're wise, while you can't trust the rulers nor can you guarantee that you're going to change them; you can trust God. You can honor him and shine the light of God's glory to the world around you and you pray that God might work his glory through you to others that they might fear and trust in the Lord!

In hearing all this you might be tempted to think, "Ok, but what does this look like practically, Pastor Timothy?" Well, I honestly don't think I ought to give specific examples. Wisdom takes work and practice. It takes prayer and God's discernment. It takes a community of believers coming together to help one another in specific instances. I think what I can say is what I've already said. Seek the welfare of the society around you for in its welfare, we'll find our welfare. And we're the only ones who can give true welfare because we have the gospel – the all-wise message that points to Jesus, God's wisdom!

So, if you're wise; Solomon says that you must submit to the authorities in your society. But then he goes on and talks about how we are to fear God when good laws are forsaken.

2. Fear God when good laws are forsaken (vv. 10-13).

Look at verses 10-11: ¹⁰Then 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. ¹¹Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. ¹³

This is very straightforward. Solomon sees the wicked dead, and he contemplates their lives. To put in modern-day vernacular, they went to church, but God was no real part of their lives. We don't know what wickedness they partook of, but they did. They climbed the ladder of success, but they were wicked.

Here's where someone might say, "Who cares? It's not personal. It's business!" Oh but wait. When society doesn't punish wickedness, what will happen? Think about it. Solomon has already said that nobody's perfect. In fact, everyone is sinful. What's a sinful person going to do when they see they can get away with something? Answer: they're going to try to get away with it. That's Solomon's point. If

¹² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 8:6–9.

¹³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 8:10–11.

society doesn't punish evil, the children of that society will pursue with greater vigor. And what we've done as adults is give our children an even worse culture in which to live.

But what does it matter anyway? Sinners are going to sin. So, it doesn't matter what the laws are, right? Wrong. God, in his providence, speaks to the world of the reality of him even through laws that display his character. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. We ought to be concerned for them and to also trust God will work his will through his children. Even though, as Solomon continues in verse 12, "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."¹⁴ Oh yes, sinners will still sin. They will try to get the upper hand and live long. But Solomon is convinced that somehow and in some way, those who fear God can say "all will be well."

And the reason why they can have this confidence is because "they fear before him." The idea of being "before" God means that they are recognizing that they're in the presence of God always. The reformers spoke of this with a Latin phrase, "Coram Deo." It means "before the face of God." It was to remind them that they are always living under and before the watchful eye of God. This might not mean anything to some people, but when you remember that God is infinite, all-powerful, all-wise, transcendent in glory, holy, abhorring sin, untamed – doing whatever he pleases – then you will fear before him. In other words, you will have what one man says is "**the awe and holy caution that arises from the realization of the greatness of God**" (Eaton, p. 140).

Those who know God – who fear God – are those who can say "It will be well." And you have that confidence because only those who fear God have also known his forgiveness. One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 130 that says, "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."¹⁵ When you realize God's glory and what you deserve. And when you realize God's greatness and go to him for mercy; he grants it. And only those who are granted forgiveness will fear him. And we know that with forgiveness, there is life.

We get this life because of Jesus. Death is our enemy, but the resurrection of Jesus tells us that he conquered death and hell. If you refuse to follow God, Hell awaits to swallow you up. And before you get mad at God about this, just know that it's *you* who doesn't want God. God sent his son to a world who hated him so that the world could know forgiveness and life! If you turn to Jesus for forgiveness the Bible tells us that death loses its sting and God gifts you with eternal life. After the grave, you'll live forever with the God who made you and loves you. This is better than the fate of the wicked. Solomon says their days are like a shadow, and they can't prolong them. God's in control. Are you wise? Do you trust God's providence in society? And will you fear before him? There's still one more action of the wise.

3. Be joyful (vv. 14-15).

Wait, what? Sinful laws, sinful rulers, sinners who continue to sin. And we're supposed to be joyful? Let's read verses 14-15 again: "¹⁴There 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. ¹⁵And I commend joy,

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 8:12.

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 130:3–4.

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

Solomon expands the problem. It’s not just bad laws, but here we simply have sinners get what the righteous should get, and the righteous get what the sinners should get. It’s vanity. Why does that sinner get a nice house when the righteous are struggling to make ends meet? Or, put differently, why would communistic leaders elevate the wicked and put to death the Christians? From the seemingly small to the larger situations in life, Solomon says “It’s vanity.” Meaning that it’s a trouble. This is a sign of living in a world marred by sin.

But this reality shouldn’t cause us to droop our heads and wallow in self-pity. “Woe is me” is not the mantra of the Christian. Instead, Solomon calls us to a faith that overflows in joy! Listen, if wisdom changes our countenance, that must mean there is joy inside. And we aren’t to lose that joy inside. The external difficulties and pains around us can tend to take over our demeanor and we can then say “Who cares! What’s the point? Everything’s worthless.” But Solomon says, “NOT SO!”

Think about it. If the wise will endure, and God will ensure that it will be well with us, and if Solomon had already promised in chapter 7 that the end is better than the beginning; then we only have hope to look forward to. And in the New Testament, we’re told even more of the hope to come. It’s called the “blessed hope.” In Titus 2:13 we read about it, that it is the **“blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”¹⁷**

Our God and Savior – this phrase refers to Jesus and the great God, Savior and ruler over all. He’s the King whom we have given all our allegiance, and he’s coming again! The best is yet to come. And, until that day, Solomon says there are trinkets of glory that God has placed in our everyday lives: eating, drinking. Listen, when you realize what you deserve and then you realize you have God and that glories beyond your imagination await, then these daily blessings of food, bread, laughter, air conditioning, and so much more become reminders to praise God and increase in joy.

Don’t become skeptical of God – no, instead, let the pain remind you that you don’t live for this world. And let the joys remind you that the best is yet to come! And again, **we have this hope in Jesus. He is the perfect ruler, the wisdom of God who needs no counselor. He is the One who feared God perfectly and was despised and rejected by man – treated as unrighteous. And yet for the joy set before him, he endured the cross and despised its shame. Now all who call on his name will be saved and we can rejoice in Jesus and honor his name in this vain world until he comes to make all things new!**

This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.

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¹⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 8:14–15.

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Tt 2:13–14.