

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 15

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Moving on to chapter 8: The 17th c. English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, writing during the English Civil War, argued that human moral corruption was such that it would lead to a state of perpetual war. What Hobbes called the war of all against all.

In very Solomonic fashion, Hobbes famously said that, given human nature, the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. The situation could only be remedied by a strong centralized, and virtually absolute, state which Hobbes called, after the biblical sea monster, the Leviathan. Solomon seems to be speaking here about how one behaves in the belly of such a Leviathan state. The scheming of men who seek out many devices has turned his thoughts, Hobbes-like, to the idea of civil-government. For civil rule was instituted by God to order and restrain human sinfulness.

We will make two points, both of which are political in nature: First, wise service in vv. 1-6, second, limitations in vv. 7-10.

I. Wise Service

First, then, wise service. The preacher starts with two rhetorical questions and a proverb. Verse 1: Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? The implied answers here are “no one is like the wise man,” for the wise man alone knows the interpretation of a thing. The word for “interpretation” is an important clue here. It has to do with understanding dreams and riddles and enigmas. The word is used in the Genesis story of Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams, and in the book of Daniel, in connection with his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. In both cases we have faithful men of the covenant called into the service of despotic pagan kings. So we are being subtly told here that not just any wise man is in view, but rather one who is a counselor to a king. A king who, as we will see, has Leviathan-like power.

The second half of v.1 says this kind of wisdom makes a man’s face shine and the hardness of his face is changed. Wisdom, or the lack thereof, affects one’s face. For the wise man, he becomes a reflection of the Divine countenance and light. God lifts up His face to shine upon us, and in so doing, lifts up our

countenance. We are not talking about halos here, or some mystical glowing quality. But the wise man is opened up to God and thus opened up to his neighbor in a way that IS physically palpable. Wise men have soft faces. And this shining face, this gracious bearing, is crucial for those counseling rulers with great power. For, as Prov 16:15 puts it: in the light of the king's face there is life, and his favor is like clouds that bring the spring rain. Those who wish to see the light of the king's face should enter with their own countenance softened by the peaceable and pure wisdom from above.

Our hunch that we are talking here about the wisdom needed for royal counselors is confirmed by the transition in v.2. I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Kingly authority is established by God's oath, and often, in this world, by a reciprocal oath of the people to the king. Civil governments, even wicked ones, rest on divine authority. Thus, our deference and submission extends even to wicked rulers. The first order of business for the advisor is obedience – keep the king's command.

Verse 3: Be not hasty to go from his presence. This is a difficult verse to translate, but it probably refers to how one leaves the presence of the king in the case of a disagreement. Part of the radiance of wisdom is that it is clam and composed. It will hear the king out and depart in peace. The wise will not show their disapproval on their face. Proverbs says: a fool's vexation is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult. In this sense, wisdom does NOT wear its heart on its sleeve. It maintains a soft and gracious face.

In certain social settings, say among friends, it is perfectly fine for people to be able to read your face and your body language. Here, that kind of transparency could cost you your head. And when it is time to leave the king's presence, the wise counselor does not, as the next phrase says, take his stand in an evil cause. This means an evil cause against the king, as the next phrase makes clear. For he, the king, does whatever he pleases. We are here in a position of cultural and political captivity where the Sovereign has absolute power. He does what he pleases. Thus, the counselor knows that discretion is often the better part of valor. He knows that not every hill is worth dying on. He will not associate himself with murmuring dissent and rebellion.

In this situation, as v.4 puts it, the word of the king is supreme as it was in almost all ANE regimes. No one can say to him "what are you doing?" There is no separation of powers; there are no courts of appeal. The king wants his counselors to be sure, but they must realize that, in this world, the job is dangerous and their position is precarious. In v.5 the advice widens out a bit with what seems to be the citation of an unknown proverb: whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing. The thought appears to be "if you obey the king, you won't be caught up in rebellion or sedition." You will know no evil thing.

But then the preacher adds a critical piece of counsel: the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. Whether it is carrying out a plan you disagree with, or offering gracious dissent, there are two things to keep in mind. First, hearkening back to chapter 3, there is a time for everything. A time to obey, and a time to refrain from obeying. Wisdom is not concerned with simply who is right and who is wrong, it asks when is the right time for an action. How often we say the right thing to someone without realizing that it is not the right time for them to hear it. There is no wisdom in this. Wisdom engages in the excruciating difficulty of picking the right time to act.

Second, there is a just WAY to act. You can do the right thing at the wrong time, but you can also do it in the wrong way. There is a JUST way. A righteous manner. The wisdom whose fruit is righteousness is sown in PEACE, by those who make peace. Throughout the gospels the disciples try and do the right thing in the wrong way: Peter wants to defend Jesus – but with the sword. And they try and do the right thing at the wrong time: James and John want to sit at Jesus' right hand- but before they drink the cup of suffering.

So much of Jesus' discipleship is taken up with teaching them the right way: service is the way authority is to be exercised; and the right time – don't fast now while the bridegroom is with you; you'll fast later. But, verse 6 reminds us that this kind of discernment will not be easy, especially for those called into the presence a powerful king. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. The trouble here is probably two-fold:

First, it is the general trouble of human sinfulness in a fallen world. And, second, here it probably refers primarily to trouble caused by the demanding and perhaps arbitrary power of the king himself. There is a time and a way to respond, but in this situation, almost the whole sum of wisdom is in grasping them in a disordered world, under and absolute king. To be in this position is a great burden which is often not appreciated from outside.

This should make us patient with those in civil authority, or in any leadership position. True leadership is demanding. Leaders have burdens we cannot see. They have information we don't have. They have obligations which are not public. And this should make us slow to pass judgment. Leaders often have to do things which are incomprehensible to certain people, but they are not at liberty to give them the full rationale for the action. Thus, people regularly think they are simply nitwits. Political figures, kings and counselors, suffer the same fate of being misunderstood. Proverbs 25 says as the heavens for height and the earth for depth, so the heart kings is unsearchable. The king's heart is not unsearchable because it's any wiser or more mysterious than any other human heart. It's unsearchable to US, because we don't sit where he sits.

II. Limitations

Our second point is limitations. In v.7 we move into a new train of thought where the leading idea is the limitations on kings and their counselors. The king may be an absolute monarch, but v.7 says: he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? A wise man might be able to tell him on occasion, but in general, neither the king nor his advisors know the future. This is one reason centralized states fail. They are idolatrous substitutes for the living God who alone knows what will be and how it will be. Absolute monarchy turns out to be an oxymoron.

In v.8 we get four more acute limitations on the monarch's power. First, he cannot retain the spirit. No man has power to retain the spirit. This could refer to keeping oneself alive, but since that is covered in the next phrase, I take this phrase differently. The word for spirit is the same Hebrew word as the word for wind. The phrase here means he can't shepherd the wind any better than anyone else. The king and his court face all the enigmas of the vaporous world that anyone else does.

Second, he has no power over the day of death. Notice the repetition of the word POWER here. No power to retain the wind and no power over the day of death. This is another clue which tells us that the king's power is in view here. In verse 3 the king does whatever he wants. In v.4 his word is SUPREME. But, it turns out that he doesn't have power over some fundamental things. Here it is the day of death. And that is a pretty sharp limitation.

The middle of v.8 continues: there is no discharge from war. Once you engage in battle things slip out of your control. Empires almost always end in war. And no king controls the course of war. Even when he holds all the technological cards. We are now in the 14th year of a war with a bunch of low-tech jihadists.

Finally, at the end of v.8, we read: nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. This is a veiled reference to the ruler. His wickedness will not deliver him. The wise man, the wise counselor, knows that the King IS under God, the King of the nations. He is under His providence and in his, now bent and twisted world. And part of the wisdom of a royal counselor is knowing that there are times and events that the king does not, indeed cannot, control. And all of these limitations constrict his ability to do evil with impunity. Sometimes a wise man just lets the vapor do its work.

In v.9 Solomon says: 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. The last phrase tells us that we are still dealing with a corrupt political situation. Solomon is being discreet, but we can still pick up the trail. The situation here is one of destructive power. Man has power over man to his hurt. The king harms his subjects and he harms himself – in both cases by not knowing his limitations. The king and his wicked cohorts meet their end in v.10. Then I saw the wicked buried. They had

no power over the day of death. They die like dogs. But at their funerals we have to endure one more injustice. They used to go in and out of the holy place. They went to the synagogue regularly. Usually with the cameras rolling as some sycophantic clergyman shakes their hand and smiles. And then they get praise in the same city where their regime had done its damage. The church always provides some man of the cloth to eulogize these guys as if they were paragons of virtue. Funerals in general have the vice of turning ordinary folks into saints, political funerals even more so. This also is vanity. It turns out that the Leviathan state does not make life any less nasty, brutish or short.

Conclusion

Most of us won't be called into the role of counselors to political authority. Yet, we can all learn something about wise and submissive service to unreasonable authority from this short passage.

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