

Getting Along with Your Superiors

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

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Introduction:

God has placed us in a world that is filled with organisations...

- He Himself instituted the family, civil government, and church government;
 - and then you have all sorts of other organisations...
 - businesses and industries where people work, agencies to promote a cause, professional organisations, schools, financial organisations, societies—the list goes on and on!
- But since the fall, it is very often difficult for us to get along well with each other in all of our organisations...
 - One of the evidences of the fall is seen in the difficulty we have with this.
 - Part of the curse of God upon us for our rebellion against Him included tensions between those in authority (superiors) with those under authority (inferiors).
- Right after the fall, the LORD told us that we would have a problem with this.
 - He told Eve that she would not only have trouble in bringing forth children, but also that her desire would be for her husband's place.
 - She would want to dominate him.
 - This problem reaches very far into our lives.
 - In almost every organisation, there are tensions between those in authority and those under authority.
 - Those in authority often use their authority selfishly and are slack when they don't have anyone to answer to...
 - And those under authority are often insubordinate and feel that they could run things a lot better if they were in charge.
 - It is a bad combination that leads to much unhappiness and discord, inefficiency and confusion, and eventually divorces, revolutions, church splits, and law suits.
 - All of this exposes the fact that we do not understand how to live together.
 - We do not know how to love one another before the Lord.
 - We have lost our way and we need to be converted—something that only God can do.
 - We were made in God's image, and our bickering defaces His image and makes us subject to His wrath—
 - We need both forgiveness and transformation, and that is why God sent Jesus, both to die for our sins, and to give us the Holy Spirit to transform us back into God's image.
 - We know that the triune God Himself has functioned in perfect harmony,
 - with the Son happily submitting to the Father in all things, and with the Holy Spirit happily submitting to the Father and the Son.
 - And when Jesus became flesh, He showed us what perfect submission to God ought to look like for us, even in this fallen world where people wrong us.

- By God's grace, He begins to restore us to proper order when we come to Christ.
 - He gives us a lot of instruction about how to get along with each other in His Word, and He gives us His Spirit to help us obey the Word.
 - Today, in Ecclesiastes, we are going to look at some of this instruction that is directed especially toward helping those who are under authority to know how to live in tranquillity with their superiors...
 - Solomon speaks here in particular of living before kings,
 - but we will look at the principles presented here to help us learn how to live with our superiors in all relationships.

Our scripture reading is Ecclesiastes 8:1-9.

- Please give attention to God's word as I read it to you now.

Ecc 8:1-9: Who *is* like a wise *man*? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the sternness of his face is changed. ² I say, "Keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God. ³ Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him." ⁴ Where the word of a king *is*, *there is* power; and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" ⁵ He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; and a wise man's heart discerns both time

and judgment, ⁶ because for every matter there is a time and judgment, though the misery of man increases greatly. ⁷ For he does not know what will happen; so who can tell him when it will occur? ⁸ No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death. *There is* no release from that war, and wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it. ⁹ 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.

May the LORD bless to us the hearing of His holy Word.

As you can see, this is very much focused on showing us how a wise person conducts himself under his king.

- The tranquillity of such a person is described in verse 1.
 - He is described as having a shining face because he knows how to get along in the world—how to regulate his conduct with wisdom...
 - Instead of having a stern face that is hardened and insubordinate, sour and austere, even fierce, his face is meek, mild, and serene...
- Jay Adams comments:
 - The wise man's face shines because he is happy and assured in life, because as a result of his wisdom, he knows the meaning of a thing. The wise person has become well versed in biblical truth and is able to interpret what is going on around him from God's perspective. That makes a difference. He is not wandering through this world ignorant of the processes at work.
 - To understand the meaning of life is very important. *Most people don't.* That is because they are devoid of the Spirit, care nothing for the Bible, and try to figure out life's experiences on their own.

- Matthew Paris, an atheist who grew up in Africa doing relief work in some of the poorest of countries describes the notable difference he saw in the very faces of believers where Christian missionaries had laboured:
 - “Their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world. . . .Whenever we entered a territory worked by missionaries, we had to acknowledge that something changed in the faces of the people we passed and spoke to: something in their eyes.”

But here is a question for you.

- Do you believe that it is possible for someone who lives under authority to have this shining face of wisdom...
 - Do you believe it is possible for them even to submit to that kind of authority and still to have a shining face?
 - Most people in our society have a default position that submitting to authority is not the place of wisdom.
- But our text tells us something very different!
 - It tells us that the person who has God’s wisdom knows how to live under authority in the way that God designed (on their part)...
 - no matter what kind of authority it is!
 - They are able to fulfil their role as a shining example of wisdom!
- Daniel is a very fine example of this wise living under repressive authority.
 - We are given a very full account of Daniel in this regard.
 - How wisely he behaved himself before the kings under whom he served in Babylon—ungodly though they were!
 - In Daniel 1:20, we are told of Daniel and his three friends:
 - **Dan 1:20: And in all matters of wisdom *and* understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians *and* astrologers who *were* in all his realm.**
 - And in Daniel 1:15, we are told that even their appearances were better than their peers.
- Do you believe that this is true?
 - Often those who are struggling under authority do not believe that it will go well for them if they do what God says...
 - I see it all the time—who are the miserable young people?
 - Is it the ones who cheerfully submit to their parents, or those who rebel?
 - And why do they rebel?
 - Because they believe that it will make them happier!
 - That is what Eve thought in the Garden of Eden when she ate the forbidden fruit too.
 - But it was a gross deception, wasn’t it?
 - Sadly, it is deception that we still fall for.

- This passage is given to you from God to deliver you from such deception!
 - It is written to help you live under authority with wisdom.
 - You will not be disappointed if you stick it out—even when it is difficult.
 - Yes, there will be times when you will be severely tested, but if you continue on God’s path, your face will shine with cultivated wisdom.
 - Jesus had a pathway of many sorrows, but now He is radiant with joy for having endured to the end in God’s way.
 - So don’t any of you say, “Well I have tried that and it did not work.”
 - No, either you did not put your whole heart into it or else you gave up too soon—God’s way never fails.

So now I want to show you three directives about how to live well with your superiors...

- These are either directly stated or may be deduced from what is said in our text...
 - Let’s begin with the first...

I. Obey the king for the sake of your conscience.

- This injunction is found in verse 2 where it says:
 - **Eccl 8:2: I say, “Keep the king’s commandment for the sake of your oath to God.”**

A. The obedience called for is a full obedience.

1. It literally says, “**observe the mouth of the king.**”
 - The idea is that you are to be alert to what he wants—not just doing what you must to get by...
 - It is akin to what the angels do before the throne of God—observing the face of God with a readiness to obey.
 - It is not be a sluggish obedience or a reluctant obedience.
2. You must not be like a legalist either...
 - one who obeys everything in a very literal fashion and misses the point!
 - You know, like the kid whose parents tell him not to hit his sister and he defends himself by declaring that he did not hit her, he kicked her.
 - No, the goal must be to please your superiors—not just to keep the rules.

B. And all of this is to be done for God...

1. When it says, “**for the sake of your oath to God,**” it may refer to an oath of allegiance that was taken to the king...
 - We have such oaths in many organisations...for example, wives take an oath of obedience when they marry...
 - But it may also refer to the oath that every believer makes to God when we affirm that we are His people...
 - In baptism, we affirm that Jesus is our Lord who is to be obeyed, and part of our obedience to Him involves obedience to the civil magistrate, to our parents, to our husband, to our boss at work...
 - He commands us to obey those who are in authority over us, so we must do it, as Paul says, not only for fear of punishment, but for conscience sake—conscience before God.

2. This makes your obedience to your superiors much more important!
 - a. You are not just doing it for them, but for the Lord your God—
 - your gracious Lord who has loved you and redeemed you and given you eternal life!
 - He calls you to obey—it is for the sake of the order that He has appointed!
 - It is for the beauty and order of society that He wants you (at least on your part) live out!
 - You only promote that God defying ugliness of society if you don't do your part by obeying from the heart those who are over you.
 - b. Apart from life in Jesus Christ, you can't render that kind of obedience...
 - You don't know how to truly love in a sacrificial way until you have come to know His great love.
 - Such living does not make sense to you until you see it in Jesus.
3. But obeying superiors for the sake of your oath to God also puts a limitation on your obedience.
 - Your loyalty to your earthly superiors is not ultimate...
 - If at any time you are commanded to do anything that is contrary to God's will (not your will, but God's will), you are to refuse.
 - Don't obey a pastor or a husband or a king or an elder in the church or a boss who asks you to sin against God!
 - They are to be obeyed if they ask you to do things that are not convenient or not pleasant, but they are never to be obeyed if they ask you to sin!
 - But your mode of operation is to be that which watches the mouth of your superior—that which has an antenna up to receive his wishes so that you can carry them out!
 - That is the path of wisdom before your superior that will make your face shine!

C. So what about it?

- Wives, are you rendering this eager obedience to your husbands? Are you doing it for the Lord?
- Children, are you looking eagerly to please your father and mother?
- Citizens, are you seeking to please the magistrate?
- Church members, are you eagerly obeying the elders?
- Employees, do you render this heart-felt service to your superiors?
 - It doesn't matter if they are worthy or not—Christ has asked you to do this and He is worthy...
 - So are you doing it?

Now let's look at the second directive that we are to follow if we want to shine with godly wisdom before our superiors...

II. Don't be too quick to oppose them—to oppose the establishment!

- A. Verse 3 warns you not to be hasty to go from the king's presence.
1. When servants are serving their master, they stand before him in order to receive his orders—in other words, they are before him as subjects.
 - But when they go out—it means that they walk away from their service to him...
 - You might remember when Israel rebelled against David—the cry was:
 - **1 Kings 12:16: “What share have we in David? *We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Now, see to your own house, O David!*” So Israel departed to their tents.**
 - We are the rather to stand in the presence of leaders...
 - We are to be like Solomon's servants when they were observed by the Queen of Sheba...
 - **1 Ki 10:8: “Happy *are* your men and happy *are* these your servants, who stand continually before you *and* hear your wisdom!”**
 - They did not go out from him in rebellion, but stood in his service.
 2. But in our sin, we love to complain about those who are in authority over us.
 - We think that we know better than they do—that if we were in charge, we'd know how to do things a lot better!
 - That if our plan had not been vetoed by them, things in the shop or things in the home or things in the nation would be running a lot more smoothly.
 - We get together with our peers and we make our case...
 - Women about their husbands...
 - Children about their parents...
 - Citizens about their governors...
 - Church members about their elders and their pastor...
 - Employees going on about their boss.
 - Everyone thinks they could do it so much better. They know just what needs to be done!
 - Jude actually points out that false teachers capitalize on this complaining spirit to lead people into error.
 - They stir up all kinds of complaints and objections...
 - And then it is easy to lead people away.
 3. After we have made our case about how awful our superiors are, we break away from their authority...we cease to serve them anymore.
 - We stop yielding to them, working with them, letting them set the agenda as God has appointed...
 - We become ungrateful and insubordinate.
 - We refuse to carry out their plans.
 - We feel perfectly justified...
- And then if we are *really* foolish...

B. We take a stand against our superiors—a stand for an evil thing (that we of course call a good thing).

1. In a kingdom, this is to raise up an insurrection—a mutiny—a revolution—

- Very often these are miserable failures...
- Very often, the government that replaces the establishment is far worse, far more oppressive, far more corrupt than what it was before.
- Very often, it is terribly divided as well—all the malcontents who supported the new government are still malcontent because all of them wanted something different from each other...
 - They were unified in being opposed, but they cannot unite in moving forward on a new agenda.
 - I have seen church groups who break away to form their own congregation that are like that.
 - They break away and then they can't get along with each other.

2. Note carefully what the warning is though—it is that we not be hasty in taking such measures.

- There are times when we have to take a stand for a good thing.
 - That is what Jesus did—but He did not break away from the establishment—He was driven away unjustly by them.
- But when we are hasty, we take a stand for an evil thing—for a selfish thing, for nothing constructive...
 - All we want is to get out.
 - We dream that all will be well if we break away.
 - So we get our divorce, or we run away from home, or we quit our job or we leave the church...
 - Now we are free!
 - But are we really?

C. Solomon warns about the trouble that comes from such insurrection...

1. He warns that kings have authority to crush you!

a. They do whatever they please...

- They have eyes that see very far, ears that hear all, and arms that reach very far to strike their adversaries...
- What I mean is, they have many servants so that if you go out and raise up an insurrection in a village,
 - the king will learn of it and will have you crushed.
- As verse 4 says,
 - **Ecc. 8:4: “Where the word of the king is, there is power! And who may say to him, “What are you doing?”**
 - All he has to do is speak and his servants go into action.

- b. It is very difficult to oppose him. He can make it very hard for you.
 - He can dispatch his armies and come after you.
 - Verse 5 reminds you that if you keep his commands, you will experience nothing harmful...
 - But watch out if you try to oppose him!
 - Romans 13 reminds us that God Himself has given your superior his authority...
 - He has authority, and you are resisting the ordinance of God!
2. Let me tell you, insurrection is not as good as it may seem at first!
- a. Take a teenager who breaks away in rebellion against his parents...
 - What happens to him?
 - He runs away from home and faces instant poverty!
 - He has to try to get a job—and he hates work, so he becomes a charge of the government.
 - All of the sudden his bed and his meals at home start to look a lot more attractive!
 - But now he is ALONE—with no one to care, no one to love him.
 - b. Take the woman who breaks away from her husband...
 - She has a family and she breaks it to pieces by her rebellion.
 - Don't misunderstand—men are by no means innocent—it is just that we are talking about those under authority today...
 - But the rebellious wife...
 - She is tearing her own household to pieces—destroying the unity and peace of her family because of her own selfishness.
 - If she had not been so hasty, she might have been able to establish a beautiful, loving home with her husband...
 - A home where love and kindness flourished...
 - But she could not keep the command.
 - Like Eve, she could not go on with the appointed agenda.
 - It must be done her way—so now she is ALONE!
 - c. Take the church member who breaks away—right at the time when there were lessons to be learned!
 - The Lord had brought some challenging things for you to deal with.
 - You would have learned so much by working out those relationships—working through it all with patience...
 - But you were hasty—you wanted out—so you bolted!
 - You left without trying...
 - You will face the same lessons again in the next place...
 - So will the rebellious wife and the rebellious employee...

3. This sort of thing cannot go well!
 - When you oppose the one that God has put over you, you oppose God and it will not go well for you—it cannot go well!
 - You think you are free, but you are not free at all!
 - I know from experience the value of working through issues!
 - My first year of marriage was terrible—I was a selfish fool—the older I get, the more I can see how selfish I was.
 - But I am so thankful that my wife and I did not break it up...
 - We worked through it before God and we learned and we grew into God's calling and He has given us over a quarter of a century of blessing!
 - The same thing happened with my church.
 - My church was the Northeast Presbytery—from which the Canadian Presbytery emerged.
 - I felt that I was being treated unfairly—and in a lot of ways I still think that...Dave was by my side on the session...
 - And we wanted to bolt—we wanted to leave...
 - But we stayed to work it through—we knew that God wanted us to work it through and that we must not be hasty to break away from the presence of those that God had put over us...
 - So we stayed, and God taught us and helped us...
 - We learned, we grew, we grew together with our Presbytery, and now all is well—very well—better than it was before the trouble arose.
 - My brothers and sisters, it is God's word that tells you not to be hasty in going from superiors!
 - It is God, and He means what He says!
 - If you are rebelling, if you are breaking apart your home,
 - don't do it!
 - Don't oppose the authority that God has put over you.
 - You are destroying your own family, your own church, your own country, your own life!
 - There are lessons to be learned there—even if the powers that be are wrong!
 - Obey them—that is what God calls you to do.

➤ If you are really so much wiser than your superiors, then take up this challenge!

III. Learn how to live with your superiors in wisdom.

- Learn how to live in a way that glorifies God even when they are wrong.
 - If you can't do that, you are not ready to break away and lead anything!
 - If you haven't learned to live where you are, you are not ready to go anywhere else.

- A. A wise man knows what to do in the place that God has put him!
- That is what verse 5 & 6 speak about...
 - **Ecclesiastes 8:5-6: 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.**
 - Do you see what that is getting at?
 - 1. The wise man knows how to act right in the very place that God has put him.
 - Instead of breaking away from the king (or from her husband or parents or church or workplace or whatever)
 - The wise person learns how to get along right there!
 - He learns to discern time and judgement!
 - This person knows the time to speak and the time to keep silent, the time to initiate, and the time to draw back...
 - When to appeal to your superior and when to submit without a word of complaint.
 - 2. Daniel is a marvellous example of this!
 - As we have already seen, the Bible says that he had more wisdom than all who were in Nebuchadnezzar's court!
 - He always seemed to know what to do!
 - All the kings under whom he served loved him because he was loyal—
 - They knew they could trust him—they knew he loved them and was out to do good to them.
 - They knew that he would not act for his own selfish interests and that he would endeavour to carry out all their policies...
 - Yet, he understood when it was the time to refuse to obey the king—
 - He refused to eat the king's food that violated the dietary laws that God had for His people at that time...
 - but how respectfully and how wisely Daniel handled this refusal!
 - There were times when he spoke sternly to the king—calling him to account for his sins in the name of the Lord.
 - He did this with Nebuchadnezzar when his pride brought God's hand upon him—and Nebuchadnezzar received it...
 - He did this again with Belshazzar on the night that judgement fell upon him and his kingdom.
 - And then under Darius, Daniel refused to obey the command to desist all prayers to any but the king...
 - He knew the danger and he was cast into the lion's den—but he was there with a pure conscience before God.

- This makes it clear that for all his excellent obedience to the ungodly kings he served under,
 - he was not doing it for his own prosperity or safety—though it did give him both prosperity and safety for the most part...
 - He was doing it to honour the LORD God Almighty!
 - He discerned the right, God-honouring thing to do in every situation.
3. Do you know what keeps us from having that kind of wisdom?
- It is that we are not committed to living for the glory of God.
 - Why should God give us wisdom to know how to live if we are not committed to live for Him?
 - Our focus is not to glorify Him in the place He has put us—it is to get our own way—to follow our own way.
 - Don't you realize that God Almighty is the one to live for?
 - He alone is worthy of your life!
 - When you realize that, you will learn what to do—you will discern time and judgement...
 - God will show you if you want to know...
 - In John 7:17, Jesus said:
 - **John 7:17: If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.**
 - And James said:
 - **Jas 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.**
 - You don't need a change of circumstances to live well—
 - That is what we think—more money—more freedom—freedom from this husband or these parents or this king...
 - But no!
 - You need God's grace and then you will be able to live right where you are with beautiful wisdom!
4. You will learn to do this even when you are finding life very difficult under your superior...even when it is really bad...
- That is what the end of verse 6 is speaking about—*even though the misery of man increases greatly!*
 - Even when oppression is increasing—when it is hard—when your superior is selfish and seems to be getting worse...
 - When you are wise, you will know what to do in that situation...
 - You will be wise when you are oppressed and you will be wise when you are blessed.
 - Your goal is to glorify God, not just to get relief or freedom or peace or whatever it is you are craving.

B. A fool always supposes that he can live much better in the place that God has **not** put him (especially if he can be apart from his superior).

1. The fool has it all figured out—

- He thinks he knows just what it will be like when he sets up his own empire—it will be so much better than what his superior has done when he is in charge!
 - Fools are dreamers.
- But maybe you really are more capable and would do a better job.
 - Daniel would have—don't you think?
 - He would have been a better king than any of the kings under which he served.
- But Daniel was wise.
 - He knew that God had not appointed him to be king and to do everything in a better way.
 - God had appointed to live in the place that God had put him...
 - And in *that* place, Daniel's wisdom was far more pleasing and beautiful than if he had been king!
 - God had a purpose in having ungodly kings at that time...
 - He had raised them up over His people to humble them...
 - So Daniel did not try to take over.
 - He just served where God had put him.
 - That is beautiful, "shining face" wisdom!

2. But the truth is, you really don't know if you could do a better job anyway.

- It looks so easy until you have the responsibility.
- Solomon calls you on that in verse 7...
 - He tells you that even the wise man...
 - **Ecc 8:7: does not know what will happen...who can tell him when it will occur—**
 - or as the ESV says, **who can tell him how it will be.**
 - You simply do not know...
 - In fact, as verse 8 shows, nobody even knows when they will die!
 - Everyone fights the battle for life and death, and nobody can run away from that war (like you are wanting to run from the king)
 - You have no power over that tyrant of death...
 - It will take you whenever it decides and you can't change that.
 - Even the wise man does not know when that will come for him.
 - He is simply committed to serving God in whatever does happen...
 - He does not dream about how things would look if only he were to do it his own way.
 - There is no way to predict whether he would succeed.

3. Do you see the point?
 - You can spend all your time trying to figure out what you do not know—how it will be if you do not submit to your superior...
 - Or you can spend your time seeking wisdom to live for the glory of God in service to that superior!

C. There is only one thing about which you can be sure...

1. It is stated at the end of verse 8—wickedness will not deliver you.
 - **Ecc 8:8: wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it.**
 - If you break away in rebellion, it will not go well because such breaking away is wickedness.
 - People always think that they will be free—*delivered*—if they rebel...
 - But God's word assures you that you will not be delivered!
 - The only thing wickedness will deliver you over to, is death and judgement!
2. Indeed, even the king himself will not be delivered by wickedness...
 - He may indeed get away with many things by using his authority.
 - He may increase his wealth and power for many years by wickedness...
 - but in time his tyranny will collapse and he will be brought to judgement.
 - Solomon has seen this...verse 9
 - **Ecc 8:9: 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.***
 - The *ruling* mentioned here is to domineer—it is to lord it over—it is the selfish kind of ruling.
 - Our text has not challenged superiors until now...
 - If you are one, you are never to lord it over those under your care.
 - If you do, you destroy whatever it is you have authority over—your family, your business, your kingdom...
 - You may be able to get away with it for a while, but in the end you only hurt yourself by your selfishness.
3. The point is, wickedness will deliver neither kings nor their subordinates...
 - Foolish men resort to wickedness as an easy way to get what they want right away...
 - It seems like a sure way to them...
 - But Solomon is telling you that it is a sure way to hurt yourself and no way to be delivered!
 - Wickedness never delivers anyone in the end.
 - Of that you can be sure.

Conclusion:

So what is the conclusion?

- The conclusion is that wickedness can never deliver you but the LORD can deliver you!
 - The wise man is the one who trusts in Him.
 - Don't try to gain a better way for yourself by rebelling against those God has put over you...
 - Trust in the LORD and He will lift you up in time...
 - But do not forget—it is in His time...you need patience and wisdom!
 - Jesus had to suffer all sorts of maltreatment from His superiors...
 - But it was only a matter of time until they were brought down and He was exalted to His throne in glory!
 - And this reigning Lord Jesus promises you that if you come to Him, He will deliver you!
 - He will pardon all your sins and He will give you the grace you need to live for the glory of God in this fallen sinful world...
 - until the day comes that He raises you up!
 - And now, for all of us who love Him,
 - It is to Him—to King Jesus—that we submit!
 - And He calls us to submit to those who are in authority over us in the church, the nation, the province, the workplace, the home.
 - Let us shine in the place that He has put us—not try to be in some other place!