

Heavenly Wisdom and Subjection to Lawful Authority #2

Ecclesiastes 8:1-5; Acts 5:29

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A humble cheerful submission to the lawful authority God has appointed over us is one of those graces that wondrously beautifies the Christian's character and testimony in this world. There is nothing so contrary to our fallen and rebellious nature inherited from Adam than to uphold and defend the honor and obedience owed to God through His lawful authorities (whether in the family, church, or state). Solomon argues that this grace of godly submission is the fruit of heavenly wisdom (in Ecclesiastes 8:1-5), for after Solomon points us to the beauty of heavenly wisdom in Ecclesiastes 8:1, he describes for us one prominent fruit of that heavenly wisdom: godly submission. Thus, dear ones, one way to know whether you are growing in heavenly wisdom (that is, in the mind of Christ) is to test yourself as to your growth in the area of godly submission. Perhaps the greatest test of godly submission comes when those who have lawful authority over you require you to do something that you do not want to do—not because it is unlawful, but because it is not your preference. You would rather do it this way, rather than that way. You may have explained to those over you why you think it is better to do it your way. It may seem so clear to you. You may wonder how there could possibly be any objection to your way, and yet there is no willingness to bend to your preference by those in authority (whether in the home, the church, or at work). There is where you are tested in regard to your submission to God and to those He has placed over you. Will you beautify your profession of faith, or will you "uglify" your profession of faith in that circumstance (you won't find "uglify" in the dictionary—but it just seemed to fit)? The Lord Jesus (though being the Son of God) beautified His holy character when He voluntarily submitted Himself to the lawful authority of Joseph and Mary (weak, frail sinners whom He, the Son of God, had created). The result of that voluntary subjection was that as a human being, He increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with man (Luke 2:52).

This is the second part of the sermon that was begun last Lord's Day from our text in Ecclesiastes 8:1-5. We covered the first main point from our text which was this: (1) The Beauty of Heavenly Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 8:1). We began the second main point, but did not finish it which is where we find ourselves this Lord's Day: (2) The Submission of Heavenly Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 8:2-5).

II. The Submission of Heavenly Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 8:2-5).

A. Last Lord's Day we began this second main point by considering two preliminary questions, the first of which was this: Is submission required of when there is no lawful biblical authority to whom you might submit?

1. The simple answer is that a conscientious submission to an unlawful authority would be sinful. Why is that the case? A submission for conscience sake implies a lawful authority to whom a lawful submission may be given.

2. But then is submission to the lawful commands of an unlawful authority lawful? Yes, for it is a submission for wrath's sake (i.e. a submission not to the lawfulness of the authority, but a submission to the lawfulness of the command). Submission for wrath's sake is submitting to what is agreeable to God's Word, so as to avoid the wrath and sword of the magistrate. In other words, if you witness a bank robbery and are required by the court to testify against those who robbed the bank, you must submit to this requirement—not because the present court system is lawfully constituted under God's Law, but because what is required is agreeable to the Word of God. To be silent in such a case would be to consent to the robbery (Psalm 50:18). If the Law of God is summarized in doing unto others as you would have others do unto

You, would you want everyone to be silent who witnessed a robbery of your possessions?

B. The second preliminary question that we now need to address before looking more closely at our text in Ecclesiastes 8:2-5 is this: Is submission required of when there is a lawful biblical authority in place, but when what is commanded of you is not lawful or reasonable?

1. You cannot submit to any unlawful command or sinful law no matter how lawful that human authority may be. The qualification to all biblical submission to lawful authority is “in the Lord” (Colossians 3:18), which implies that submission to human authority must first be agreeable to submission to God and His commandments. Just because a husband is a lawful leader in the home does not mean that a wife must submit to his every command (even when that command is a violation of the Law of God). If ever there is any discrepancy between submission to God and even to those who have a lawful authority over you, you must always obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). Thus, when you read of the lawful submission that wives owe to their husbands (Ephesians 5:24), that children owe to their parents (Colossians 3:20), and that servants owe to their masters (Colossians 3:22), which is stated by God to be “in everything”, you ought never to understand “in everything” to mean an absolute and unqualified submission, but rather a submission “in everything” that is agreeable to the Word of God. If a wife or child is told by the husband or father to lie to someone on the phone, so as to avoid talking to that person on the phone, they cannot do so. When King David (a lawful magistrate) ordered Joab, the captain of his armies, to pull the army back away from the fighting, so as to leave Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, all by himself, unprotected against the enemy, so as to insure Uriah’s death, Joab’s duty was to disobey David (even though David was a lawful magistrate). When King Uzziah (a lawful magistrate) invaded the office of the priest by offering incense in the temple unto the Lord, the priests did not submit to Uzziah’s transgression of God’s Law, but resisted him to his face, which was their duty (even though Uzziah was a lawful magistrate).

2. A second qualification to our submission to those who have a lawful authority over us is that what is required of you must be reasonable. That which is completely unreasonable and serves no real purpose is not something that should be required by those who have a lawful authority to rule. For example, if a mother commands her child to stand on his head until she tells him to stop, or a husband commands his wife to run around the living room until he says to stop, or a Pastor commands a member of his congregation to throw stones into the lake until he says to stop, such commands are unreasonable, for they serve no purpose to edify. Such unreasonable commands simply tend to abuse one’s authority. Listen to the words of Samuel Rutherford in this regard,

No wise man would say that the Church might make a law, that all [its people—GLP] should cast stones in the water.... for what actions hath no good, nor lawfulness, nor aptitude to edify in themselves, these the [mere—GLP] will of man can never make good, lawful, and apt to edify, because only God, whose will is the prime rule of all goodness can create moral goodness in actions... Rulers commandeth as God’s ministers FOR OUR GOOD, Rom. 13:4 (Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right Of Church Government And Excommunication*, p. 648, emphases added).

Rather than building character, the mere tediousness of throwing stones for an hour or two will only provoke those under lawful authority to wrath and resentment. Thus, it is always needful for those in authority to explain the good reasons and the tendency to edify in all of their decisions and requirements rather than simply saying, “This is the way it is going to be, simply because I say so”, or “This is what you are to believe because I say so.”

3. However, before moving on, let none take advantage of what has just been said. It is very easy for any of you under lawful authority not to like the reasons that are stated to you for a particular decision because you prefer matters to be handled in a different way. However, a mere difference of opinion or a preference for something to be handled in a different way is not a reason to disregard what has been

decided by those in authority as long as lawful reasons, which tend to the edification of those under lawful authority, are stated for that decision. This qualification in your submission to the commands of those who have a lawful authority to rule is not an excuse for rebellion against those who are appointed by God to exercise rule in the home, church, or state. This principle may certainly be made a pretext for disobedience to whatever one does not like, simply because it is uncomfortable, inconvenient, or difficult to do. Before you ever decide to disregard the commandments or decisions of those in authority over you, you must realize the seriousness with which God takes the matter of rebelling against those who hold lawful authority (Romans 13:2; 1 Samuel 5:23). Dear ones, if you would beautify your character with the grace of godly submission, you must not be looking for reasons to disobey those who are in a place of lawful authority over you, but rather looking for good and lawful reasons why you cannot obey their decisions. Only as you grow in the grace of godly submission (from a cheerful heart as unto the Lord) will you grow in the grace of heavenly wisdom. For godly submission is where the rubber meets the road in the life of a Christian. Godly submission is truly applying the truth of God to your life every day. Godly submission is not mere theory. It is practical and applied Christianity by which men will know you are Christians. Although there is a place to ask "why" you are to do something, let it not come across as if you are looking for reasons to disregard the lawful authority of others. A continual "why" can become just another way of saying, "I don't want to obey you", or "I don't like what you have told me to do." You can also make the excuse that you will not obey a lawful command because you did not like the way you were told to do it or the manner in which the command was issued. Dear ones, your godly submission to those in authority over you is not dependent upon being asked nicely to do this or that. Certainly, parents, husbands, and elders ought to look for ways to communicate their decisions and reasons in a way that is edifying and winsome rather than sinfully provoking others to wrath. However, your obligation to obey God and those in authority over you is not dependent upon the manner in which you are addressed. Look not for reasons to disobey, but rather look for reasons to obey those who are in authority over you and are the ministers of God to you for good (whether in the home, in the church, or in the state).

C. Now let us move forward to consider briefly our text from Ecclesiastes 8:2-5.

1. Solomon begins in Ecclesiastes 8:2 with his counsel to "keep the king's commandment."

This certainly implies that the king's commandment is both lawful and reasonable as stated above. I would submit that the king concerning whom Solomon here speaks is a lawful magistrate—one who is the minister of God to thee for good—for in the next clause of the same verse we read, "and that in regard of the oath of God." This seems to qualify the obedience that has just been required to the king. It is an obedience that is qualified by an oath made with God as witness.

a. Most likely this oath refers to an oath of loyalty and faithfulness to magistrates, as long as they defend the one true Christian religion and defend the Law of God in his administration of justice. There is such an oath of loyalty and faithfulness likewise stated in the third article of our Solemn League and Covenant:

We shall, with the same sincerity, reality, and constancy, in our several vocations, endeavour, with our estates and lives, mutually ... to preserve and defend the king's majesty's person and authority, in the preservation and defence of the true religion and liberties of the kingdoms; that the world may bear witness with our consciences of our loyalty, and that we have no other thoughts or intentions to diminish his majesty's just power and greatness.

Although we do not presently have such lawful civil magistrates to whom we can submit as the ministers of God to us for our good, this is the oath that binds us to all such magistrates when God shall bring reformation to our land. Such lawful magistrates should be in our hearts and upon our lips in prayer.

b. Likewise we read in the Scripture of covenants which the people made with their kings to be loyal to them upon the condition of their loyalty to King of kings and Lord of lords (as with David in

1 Chronicles 11:3 and with Joash in 2 Chronicles 23:3). Such an oath makes it clear to all that a magistrate does not have a right to our absolute submission, but only has a right to our submission in the defense of that which is agreeable to and founded upon the Word of God. The honor and authority of the lawful civil magistrate is founded upon the honor and authority of God, whose minister of justice the magistrate is called to be (according to Romans 13:4).

c. The question arises, at what point does a lawful magistrate lose his lawfulness and rather become a tyrant to whom conscientious submission is no longer required? Though I cannot at this time go into great lengths in answer to this question, it may be simply stated that not every single violation of God's Law makes a lawful magistrate a tyrant. King David did not cease to be a lawful magistrate for his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband as serious as was that sin, for the constitution of the land was not altered. Nor did King Solomon cease to be a lawful magistrate, even though he had hundreds of wives and was himself led into acts of idolatry by them. One is a tyrant who alters and changes a lawful constitution and enacts laws which publicly require judges to rule against God's law in defending the wicked and in punishing the righteous. Such wicked laws that are established are flagrant and habitual violations of God's law as was true of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel concerning whom the Lord God declares, "They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not" (Hosea 8:4).

2. Solomon states the consequences of offending lawful magistrates in Ecclesiastes 8:3-4 (read these verses).

a. In Verse 3, Solomon counsels not to be hasty in showing your disloyalty to those who have lawful authority. The Scripture speaks of those who are loyal servants of a king as waiting upon him in his presence (1 Kings 10:8), and so those who hastily leave the presence of the king do so out of disloyalty and rebellion against the king. Be certain that there are good and lawful reasons to show your disloyalty to those who are in authority. Be certain that there are good and lawful reasons to rebel against those who are in authority. Do not be misled to do that which would undermine lawful authority in the home, church, or state, lest you find yourself taking a stand for rebellion against God's ministers in the home, church, or state. Solomon states there will be severe consequences that follow from such disloyalty when he says: "for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him." Now, by this we are not to understand that a lawful magistrate can do to others whatever pleases him (in an absolute sense). Only God can do that in an absolute sense. However, those who have lawful authority do have power within certain boundaries set by God to judge (as civil magistrates) or to discipline (as parents or elders) those who are rebellious. Therefore, a godly fear (in the sense of respecting the authority they have and taking that authority seriously as the representative of God) is to be held by all for those who have lawful authority over you. Dear ones, godly fear should be communicated both by your attitudes, by our words, and by your actions.

b. Next Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 8:4 the following: Read it. Solomon says in effect that a lawful magistrate (and by extension others who have lawful authority in the home and in the church) have many ears to hear what is said to others behind their backs, and have many arms to bring them to account for their rebellious words and deeds (Ecclesiastes 10:20). Again this is not intended to bring you under a slavish fear to parents, husbands, elders, or magistrates. It is simply to caution you to be careful of rebellious thoughts, words, and deeds against those who are invested with the authority to rule on behalf of God.

3. Finally, we see in Ecclesiastes 8:5 the beneficial and profitable consequence that comes when you beautify yourself with that godly submission herein required: Read it. You "shall feel no evil thing." In other words, you shall not receive the consequences that are mentioned in verses 3-4. To the contrary, you shall live peaceably and securely under that lawful authority, and that lawful authority shall prove to be for your good and edification rather than for your destruction (2 Corinthians 10:8; 2 Corinthians 13:10). This section concludes with Solomon calling you to exercise heavenly wisdom in knowing the "time and judgment" for your submission to those in authority over you. There is a "time" to submit according to God's righteous

law, and there is a time not to submit as stated earlier in the sermon. There is a “judgment”, decision, or act to which to submit according to God’s law, and a “judgment”, decision, or act to which you are not to submit. In other words, you need that heavenly wisdom because you are not to have a blind obedience to human authority. That is why in the home or in the church, it is necessary for those in authority to convey to those under their authority open doors and channels for discussion about all doubtful or controverted matters, and to do so in the home and in the church in such a way that rebellion or disloyalty are not communicated to others by what you say or do.

4. Dear ones, remember that one test of loyalty to God’s authority is loyalty to the authority He has placed over you. It is not always easy to submit to those in authority over you because those in authority are sinners, are weak, are frail, and may fall short in their lives of being the judges that they ought to be. They may make decisions with which you may disagree. However, a wrong decision or a particular personal sin does not a tyrant necessarily make. Even in such situations, you are called to beautify yourself with the adornment of godly submission as unto the Lord.

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