

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 12:	<i>Wisdom for Citizens</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 8:1-17</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, April 21, 2013</i>

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Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 9:1-17</i>

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter



TEACHING TIP

This passage doesn't confront our conclusions about government, as much as it confronts the way we think about government. It is not intended to address governmental involvement, bureaucratic disappointment, or political opinion. Rather, it seeks to lay a God-honoring perspective about government, upon which the wise citizen will make decisions and engage in conversations.

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of this heavy book, we begin to learn from the Teacher what living "in the fear of God" looks like. So far, he's asked and answered two questions; our text today considers a third:

- What does wise, God-fearing worship look like (5:1-7)?
- What does wise, God-fearing living look like (7:1-29)?
- What does wise, God-fearing citizenship look like (8:1-17)?

Any coffee shop discussion about politics reveals many unique opinions, predispositions, and emotions at play. Unfortunately those conversations are usually directed, more by the recent opinion column than by biblical theology; our perspective on government is usually affected, more by our friends' Facebook posts and Tweets than by scriptural passages; and our response to authorities is usually in keeping, more with our own political preferences than by the will of God.

Indeed, Facebook is a doorway into people's practical theology, and when one considers the political remarks posted online (especially in light of recent events—the bombings in Boston, the poison attacks on President Obama, and the initial failure of the

gun control bill), at least two conclusions can be drawn: (1) many people believe their quality of and fulfillment in life is being adversely affected by our government; and (2) many believers need to biblically rethink how they ought to live as citizens under their government.

While he is by no means exhaustive or even comprehensive here, Solomon does at least start that thinking process and provide helpful direction for all those who desire to be wise, God-fearing citizens in their country.

This discussion must be approached with God-given wisdom, for only a “wise [person]” can prosperously navigate this energized landscape and please God (v. 1a). The phrase, “interpretation of a thing” reminds us of one such “wise person,” Daniel, who feared God in his government interactions and was blessed because of it. Likewise, even today, under any kind of government, the wise citizen can find himself cheerful and fulfilled (v. 1b).

In this lesson, we’ll again allow Solomon to be our Teacher, exhorting us to **live as wise citizens** and showing us how. And, as we have grown to expect, at the root of wise citizenship is “the fear of God.”

A WISE CITIZEN RESPECTS THE GOVERNMENT’S AUTHORITY (vv. 1-9).

The summary verse in this passage is verse 4—“Where the word of a king is, there is power [lit. the word of the king is authoritative]; and who may say unto him, ‘What doest thou?’” The most powerful, influential men in our world’s history have been government officials who had nearly limitless resources and unchecked power (cf. 1 Samuel 8:10-18). One commentator notes, “The nearly unlimited power [kings] possessed in the ancient world meant that those who had to deal directly with them required exceptional wisdom.”¹ While some modern governments have made an appearance of checking such supremacy, many movies and TV series imagine the abuse of

power that still pervades those governments. Indeed, government has tremendous authority, and those who would interact with such authorities need to do so with respect, evidenced in three responses.

1. They respond in submission (vv. 2-4).

Read verses 1-4.

Illustration: A 1970s graffito summarizes how many people feel about their particular government—“Don’t bother to vote—the government always get in!”

In many (all?) governments, such cynicism and apathy may be justified; however, that attitude fails to come to terms with the Teachers admonition in verses 2—“I counsel thee to keep the king’s commandment, and that in regard of the oath of God.” This admonition is not confusing, nor is it lacking cause. Solomon clearly calls us to submit to our authorities, for the word “keep” means “watching in order to obey” (Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 29:8; 1 Kings 2:43; Jeremiah 35:18; Ezekiel 20:18). This initial injunction is then followed by two subsequent imperatives—“be not hasty to go out of his sight” (i.e., desertion and disloyalty—cf. 10:4; Hosea 11:2) and “stand not in an evil thing” (i.e., defiance and disobedience). The wise citizen will make submission to his government a regular practice.

Solomon provides two reasons why such submission is important—one is theological (v. 2); the other is practical (v. 3).

a. We must submit because of God’s will (v. 2).

It is God’s will for us that we submit to our governments (cf. 1 Peter 2:13-15a). In the words of the New Testament, “The powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1). In our text, Solomon grounds his injunction on “the oath of God” (v. 2). This most likely refers to “swearing allegiance” to one’s king (cf. 1 Chronicles 29:24), a greatly intensified form of our

Pledge of Allegiance. Notice that “this oath clearly indicates the relationship between government and God [cf. 2 Chronicles 36:13; Proverbs 24:21; Romans 13:2; 1 Peter 2:17]. All government—whether just or unjust, democratic or despotic—comes under the providential care of God for the good of man.”² Therefore, to rebel against our government is to rebel against God. “Our obedience to God is verified by our obedience to the secular authority that he refers to as his ‘minister to you for good’ (Rom. 13:1-7). Anarchy is always worse than bad government.”³

Application: So, what are your excuses for not submitting to your government? Are higher taxes or big government unbiblical? Does the legalization of gay marriage, abortion, and marijuana allow us to disregard the government’s authority over us? When we disagree with a legislative or judicial decision, is the wisest recourse to vehemently crusade against it? When our authority happens to be of a differing party or opinion, does that give us permission to slander and publicly reprehend? Does government scandal or impeachment undermine this command to submit?



Both Solomon and Paul call upon us to submit to our government authorities. What were some notable problems within their governments that some might have used as excuses to rebel? Solomon—sexual scandals, ongoing wars, unjustified spending; Paul—publicized violence (i.e., Roman Colosseum), legalized emperor worship, institutionalized slavery, corrupt tax system



According to 1 Peter 2:13-17; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Titus 3:1-7, what is a better catalyst to government reform than insubordination? gracious submission and gospel evangelism

b. We must submit because of the government’s wrath (v. 3).

In verse 3, we have the simplicity of mom’s counsel to her little toddler—“Don’t touch the stove, because you’ll get burned!” In our context, “Obey your authorities, or they will punish you” (cf. Romans 13:1-7; esp. v. 5). But, even as that Romans 13 passage indicates, this reason is rooted in the first (i.e., they execute the punishment of God).



Application: Consider reading through Romans 13:1-7 and praying as a class/table together that God will give you faith to believe and live out this passage (i.e., responding in submission), even when you feel your government is corrupt and you’re tempted to rebel.

2. They respond in discernment (vv. 5-7).

Read verses 5-7.

Verses 5-7 employ language that hearkens back to Ecclesiastes 3:1, 11, 17, reminding us that above and beyond the frustration of bad government is a higher power still (cf. 5:8—Solomon will return to this theme later in our own passage, too). Therefore, with God as our ultimate Lord and the fear of Him giving us discernment, we recognize that there are appropriate “times” to entreat and engage our rulers. After all, there is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak...[even] a time of war, and a time of peace” (Ecclesiastes 3:7-8). Thus, balancing our fundamental responsibility of submission is this healthy exhortation to be discerning.

Solomon writes of such discernment in verses 5b-6a—“A wise man’s heart discerneth both the time and judgment, because to every purpose [lit. matter] there is a time and judgment.” “Time and judgment” can be translated “proper time and procedure” (NASB, NIV, NET, HCSB). In other words, the wise person discerns what to do/say and when to do/say it.⁴



What Biblical characters demonstrate such discernment? *Joseph (Genesis 40-41; cf. 41:14), Jonathan (1 Samuel 19:4-6), Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-14), Esther (Esther 7: 2-4), Daniel (Daniel 1:8-14), and Paul (Acts 21:37-40; 22:22-23:11; 24:1-26:32)*

a. In order to avoid harm (v. 5)

The “excellence” (2:13-14), “profit” (7:11-12), and “strength” (7:19) of discernment (seen here in its “keep[ing] [of] the [king’s] commandment”—cf. v. 2) is that its users “feel [lit. know/experience] no evil thing.” So, fundamentally, discernment helps us avoid the harm that would otherwise befall our disobedience (cf. Proverbs 14:35).

b. In order to handle harm (v. 6)

Verses 6 and 7 reintroduce us to reality and remind us that exceptions to the above point are frequently known. Indeed, there is a “proper time and procedure for every matter,” but “the misery of man is great upon him.”⁵ Within the total context of this book, “misery” probably refers to “human frustration, perplexity and strain at the oppressive (‘great upon man’) burden of life.”⁶ However, since the word “man” is definite (i.e., “the man”), it may refer to the king who is oppressing his subjects (i.e., making their life miserable; cf. v. 9). Either way, the point is clear, our discernment doesn’t always help us escape harm, so it will be necessary to help us handle harm.⁷

c. In order to accept harm (v. 7)

Even as we’ve seen elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, such misery and harm is intensified by our ignorance of the future—“For he knoweth not that which shall be, [so] who can tell him when [or how] it shall be?” Therefore, the wise citizen has the discernment to accept

harm/misery/difficulty as being part of living under human government and living “under the sun” (v. 9).



Application: What harm/frustrations/difficulty/misery might God-fearing citizens in America have to discerningly accept (cf. Luke 6:27-36)? *open discussion*

3. They respond with perspective (vv. 8-9).

Read verses 8-9.

Verses 8-9 passively remind us that God has programmed the system of government so that the kinks will be worked out. The ESV translation of these two verses seems to be the most helpful as we seek to make sense of Solomon’s point.

No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from [that] war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 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.

Even though a government official abuses his authority and exercises oppressive “power over man to his hurt” (v. 9), that despot is utterly powerless (“has no power”) against the impending day of his death and judgment (v. 8; cf. Hebrews 9:27).⁸ Solomon basically says the same thing three ways in verse 8—the wicked ruler cannot retain his spirit when God calls him to account, nor can he escape the day of his death, nor can he be discharged from his fight against its onslaught. Therefore, what advantage was his wickedness? None! He will die and his wickedness with him, launching him into judgment (3:16-17).

A man may be able to lie and cheat his way out of many difficulties in life, but in death, all his efforts will fail. Extortion and exploitation will not add one hour to his

*miserable life. Despots may stash up great hordes of wealth before they flee into exile, but there is no exile from the [sic] Judgement Day of God. What a grim prospect for those who thought they were powerful 'under the sun'!*⁹

History records that every brutal and wicked leader has experienced complete powerlessness in the face of death. And just as restarting a computer is sometimes what's needed to fix the bugs and restore it to proper function, history teaches us that God often orchestrates the death of a despot to turn the tide and alleviate the misery. Thus, in Solomon's typically veiled manner, he reminds us that there's always more to life (in this case, government) than meets the eye—perspective.

Application: While more specific application will be made at the end of this study, ask yourself some questions to evaluate your obedience to this first point. Are you fostering attitudes of submission and discernment toward government? Are you allowing a fuller (eternal) perspective to mitigate your frustrations with government and compel you to obey still? Or are you fighting and undermining government in some way that violates the clear will of God?

Transition: God-fearing believers are wise citizens. As such, they respect the government's authority, and secondly, they recognize the government's inadequacy.

A WISE CITIZEN RECOGNIZES THE GOVERNMENT'S INADEQUACY (vv. 10-14).

Enough has already been hinted at regarding government's inadequacy in verse 1-9, so its fuller commentary in these verses is not surprising. What is especially helpful in this paragraph is the contrast between the failure of human government and the facts of divine government. This contrast is one that the God-fearing

citizen easily recognizes, and thus, he puts no ultimate confidence¹⁰ in human government (even though he does respect its authority).

1. **The failure of human government (vv. 10-11)**

Read verses 10-11.


Before we begin to comment on these verses, let's first ensure a good translation. The word that provides some translation differences is "forgotten" (KJV). There is good reason¹¹ to translate this word as "praised," especially in light of the context (vv. 11-12) in which the wicked person flaunts his irreligion. We will adopt this translation (cf. ESV, NIV, HCSB, NET), and in these two verses a downward progression, discernable within many governments, becomes readily evident:

First, *religion is corrupted* (v. 10a). Solomon observes that, before they died, the "wicked" used to "come and [go] from the place of the holy [i.e., the temple]." They don the trappings of religion, but not its transformation.

Second, *corruption is praised* (v. 10b). Their depravity is masked by their hypocritical religiosity, and thus they are given praise.

Third, *justice is delayed* (v. 11a). Sentencing and punishments get caught up in red tape or apathetic offices.

Finally, *wickedness is encouraged* (v. 11b). "Therefore, the heart of the sons of men is fully set [with]in them to do evil." In their very core ("heart"), wickedness is fostered.

 **Application:** How have you witnessed this progression in or through our own government?
(possible **Illustration:** Bill Clinton) *open discussion*

2. *The facts of divine government (vv. 12-14)*

Read verses 12-14.

Against that downward progression is the order of God, discovered in verses 12-14. With clarion confidence, Solomon looks through what he sees to what he cannot see. He doesn't care how depraved, influential, and prolonged the life of a wicked ruler may be (even if their tyranny is presently affecting us, v. 14), "yet surely I know" that "it shall not be well with the wicked" (v. 13); but "it shall be well" with the righteous (v. 12). And, as we saw last week, lying at the heart of this contrast is the fear of God. Those who fear God (stated 2x in v. 12 for emphasis) may not be honored in this life, but they will be blessed at some point (v. 12). Alternatively, the wicked has no fear of God (v. 13) and thus will be destroyed. This may not happen until the "end" (cf. Psalm 73:17ff),¹² even as verse 14 suggests, but "surely" it will happen. Divine government is right and fair, and it will always have its way.



Application: What other biblical passages help us discover the nature of divine government? Isaiah 9:6-7; Psalm 2; 103:19; Revelation 21-22

Transition: A final characteristic of wise, God-fearing citizenship is discovered in verses 15-17. It's really a response to everything we've seen so far. Here, we learn that a wise citizen rests in spite of the government's inability.

A WISE CITIZEN RESTS IN SPITE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S INABILITY (vv. 15-17).

A wise citizen's confident resting expresses itself in two forms.

1. *They enjoy life (v. 15).*

Read verse 15 (below).

Solomon writes, "Then I commended mirth [or the enjoyment of life], because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry [or enjoy life], for that shall abide with him of [or accompany him in] his labour the days of his life which God giveth him under the sun."

"Under the sun" the God-fearing man will still experience the "labor" or toil of living, but since he has faith in something beyond and above it, and since he refuses the vanity of foolishness and wickedness, he can enjoy his existence, nonetheless. His fear of God gives way to the gift from God (2:26; 3:13, 22; 5:18-9).¹³

So, this person is encouraged by Solomon to simply enjoy life,¹⁴ and this, in spite of everything he's just said about government. Indeed, he's reminding us that, when we're properly related to God in fear-filled faith, "no man [or government] will take your joy from you" (John 16:22, ESV). Practically speaking, we're learning that the loss of political freedom does not equal the loss of joy, that the defeat of one political party does not equal the defeat of life, that oppression from a government official does not equal the loss of favor with God. Because there is a higher throne (even higher than those mentioned in verse 4); because "The Lord hath prepared His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom ruleth over all" (Psalm 103:19); because "He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand or say unto Him, 'What doest Thou?'" (Daniel 4:35)—we can enjoy life,¹⁵ even when governments are bad and broken.



Application: What adjustments do you need to make in order to “enjoy life” in America, even though our government may not always be what it’s been? *open discussion*

2. **They trust God (vv. 16-17).**

Read verses 16-17.

Solomon ends this section much the same way as he ended 7:1-14 and 7:15-29—with the acknowledgment that man is ignorant of God’s ways. Try as we might (v. 16), the works of the 4D God (cf. v. 4 with Daniel 4:35) to our 3D eyes elude our understanding (v. 17). Yet, there are some things that we do know (vv. 12-13; cf. 3:17; 9:1¹⁶).

The answer to man’s frustration is divine revelation. God has revealed that his ways are far beyond us (Isa. 55:8–9), and urges us to forsake pointless speculation and to turn to him (Isa. 55:6–7). As Matthew Henry puts it, ‘Leaving the Lord to clear up all the difficulties in his own time, we may cheerfully enjoy the comforts, and bear up under the trials of life; while peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Ghost will abide in us through all outward changes, and when flesh and heart shall fail.’¹⁷



Application: How does the revelation of verses 12-14; 9:1 help you trust God? *open discussion*

It is probably helpful here to notice here what Solomon is not advocating—he’s not compelling us to trust government (even conservative, right-wing government); he’s not encouraging us to like government; he’s not charging us to understand government; he’s not asking us to serve in government. Instead, having already called us to submit to government, he now simply exhorts us to trust God.

CONCLUSION

Government may be a problem, but it is not *the* problem. Like so many other terrible issues in our world, bad government is just the “check engine” light informing us that something is wrong “under the hood.” While lobbying and advocating, etc., have a proper and important place in a Christian’s response to authority, such activities will never solve the problem “under the sun.”

Instead, we need a perfect Governor, an excellent King to enter our existence, right all wrongs, and establish a government of ultimate righteousness. In the message of the gospel, we discover that this King has already come once; but rather than coming to fix broken government, He came to fix broken government officials and earthly citizens through the blood of His cross and the power of His resurrection. He’s coming again, though! And at His second coming, He will complete His redemption and climax His restoration. He will dispel all the shadows—all those broken governments that He had ordained—and will establish His kingdom forever.

So, in the meantime, dear fellow citizen, fear God and honor the king (1 Peter 2:17; Proverbs 24:21), for therein God has planned that fulfillment and joy be found, even in a broken world “under the sun.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1205.

² Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 104.

³ Ibid.

⁴ It is in this point that Peter's remark, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29) is fitting. Kidner's comments here are helpful (Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976], 75-76):

Cautious as the wise man must be, he is not being pressed here to give up his integrity. His readiness to please not be servile. The lively, pleasant expression of his face, which verse 1b points out, is not put on for effect: it does indeed express him, the person he is and the cast of his mind. There is principle, too, not time-serving, in his obedience, a fact brought out in the RV's accurate translation of verse 2: "... Keep the king's command, and that in regard of the oath of God." It is within that framework that he also uses his wits, as a wise man should, to size up a perilous situation (3) and judge the timing of his actions (5b, 61). Many passages in the Old Testament witness to the limits which loyalty to God must set n courtly tact and submissiveness; one has only to think of the outspoken prophets and, among the wise, of the indomitable Daniel and his companions. If such examples shame us out of our conformism, the present verses keep the balance true by teaching due respect for government. The New Testament in the same way will give prominence now to one side of the matter, now to the other.

⁵ "Therefore" in verse 6 is better taken as "although" (NKJV, NASB, ESV, NIV, HCSB).

⁶ Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 136.

⁷ "The word for 'misery' (*rā'āh*) is related to the word for 'harm' (*rā*) in verse 5" (Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 996).

⁸ The words for "power" in verses 8-9 (2x in v. 8; 1x in v. 9) share the same root as "ruler" in 7:19; 10:5. Clearly, then, Solomon is again addressing our ultimate perspective on our authorities (and their perspective on themselves).

⁹ Winter, 108-09.

¹⁰ "This is also vanity" (v. 10).

¹¹ See the NET Bible note #40 in verse 10 for a fuller discussion of why this translation is to be preferred.

¹² "Though he may 'lengthen (his days)' (v. 12, Heb.), the judgment falling upon him is that he will not *lengthen his days!* The paradox has been elucidated in various ways. Some see a quotation (Gordis; gnb) or the hand of a redactor (e.g. Lauha). Leupold sees a play on words which may be paraphrased: 'though he go on long (in sin) he shall not make his days long.' This is possible, since 'his days' occurs in the Hebrew of v. 13 but not of v. 12. The present writer believes that the Preacher 'drops the veil of secularism' (Kidner) and puts the two statements side by side to be deliberately provocative. It is typical of the duality which pervades Ecclesiastes: from the 'under the sun' viewpoint the sinner is infuriating in his long survival; from the perspective of faith time looks different and the Preacher cannot imagine sin endlessly unrebuked and unjudged (cf. Jas 4:13f.). The paradox also raises the possibility of a life after death, where the sinner will no longer go on in his sin. This is confirmed in that *a shadow* is a figure of the insecurity of human life (cf. Pss 102:11; 109:23). In the light of this, *av neither shall he prolong his days which are as a shadow* (cf. rv) is preferable to *rsv neither will he prolong his days like a shadow*. This accords with the context, and the verse can only mean that the unrighteous will not flourish beyond the grave (cf. Pss 49; 73; Eccl. 3:16-21; 12:14)" (Eaton, 140-41).

¹³ "The verses say much the same as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Do not let your life be burdened with anxiety; relaxed enjoyment comes through seeking first the kingdom of God and taking food, drink, and clothing from the hands of your Father (Matt 6:25-34). So the Teacher refers to God-given work, God-given food and drink, and God-given joy. It is the realization of this that he commends" (J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991], 1181).

¹⁴ "As is obvious from earlier occurrences of this theme (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12, 22; 5:18-20), this is not Epicurean hedonism based on despair but is a note of submission. Man cannot control or predict adversity or prosperity; however, each day's joys should be received as gifts from God's hand and be savored as God permits (3:13; 5:19). All this is to be while one is under the sun (twice in 8:15; cf. comments on 1:3)" (Glenn, 997).

¹⁵ "Hengstenberg paraphrases it in this way: 'Joy is a godly cheerfulness and serenity of the soul; since the just man, though he may suffer from the vanities of this world, which are common to all, keeps his soul free from vain cares, calm through faith in God, and hence cheerful and ready in the performance of its duties; so that he eats, drinks and rejoices, i.e. enjoys what God has given him, in a calm, cheerful and fitting manner'" (Hengstenberg, from Lange's Commentary, p. 122, quoted in Winter, 116).

¹⁶ "The Teacher finally takes the problem of theodicy in an astonishing direction: the apparent injustice in the world is proof of the sovereignty of God. No one by even righteous deeds can gain control over God and coerce blessing from him ('love' and 'hate' refer respectively to divine favor or disfavor). One must acknowledge that all is in God's hands. The Teacher's understanding of divine sovereignty is much closer to Paul's teaching on grace and the law than is generally recognized" (Duane A. Garrett, vol. 14, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993], 330).

¹⁷ Winter, 493.