

## Teach Us, Qohelet (Part 14)

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

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When I was in college at Berkeley, people would walk everywhere and often they would ignore the traffic signals. But for some time I was convicted to wait for the signal before crossing the street. Although it made me look weird, I did it because I felt a sense of duty, that I was doing the right thing. It's this sense of doing the right thing, despite receiving no benefit, which *Qohelet* talks about in Ecclesiastes 8.

Recall in chapter 7, *Qohelet* made the case that it's worth pursuing God's wisdom even though there is no guarantee that it will make your life smoother. In 7:15, we see that the wise often perish and the wicked often prosper. Yet still we should be wise because it is good and right. In chapter 8, *Qohelet* continues to teach why pursuing wisdom and righteousness is a good thing, equating that pursuit with obedience to the king. Obedience may not benefit us, but it is our duty, and it is right. In v. 2 *Qohelet* says that we should obey "because of the oath before God," which is ambiguous as to whether the people took the oath of obedience to the king before God, or the king took an oath of obedience to God. Nevertheless, we should obey because it is God's will, and it is our duty before God. Verse 3 talks about not leaving the king's presence. Being in the king's presence refers to standing before the king in deference and acknowledging his authority which was given by God. Then *Qohelet* says not to stand up for a bad cause, which implies obedience to the king is a good cause, and it is right. The king must be obeyed because he is in control (v. 4), and his favor is on those who obey him (v. 5). People should obey the king because it is proper and right (v. 6). Just like with pursuing wisdom, our motivation for obedience to the king is simply because it is good, not because we can benefit from it.

The statement that those who obey will come to no harm does not mean that their life will be smooth. The king has some limited power to protect, provide for, and even elevate those who obey him faithfully. However, as we see in vv. 7-8, he does not control everything. He cannot know the future, nor does he have power over death (v. 7). He cannot stop wars or make the wicked stop sinning (v. 8). Therefore, even if you obey, the king will still not be able to prolong your life or prevent you from suffering at the hands of the enemy or the wicked. Still we should obey the king, not because we will benefit, but because it is right and it is our duty.

In China, where a single test can determine one's career, work is driven by a sense of duty to family and country rather than an individualistic pursuit. Among older generations in America, many people have jobs in fields that they are not passionate about. For them there is also this sense that work is their duty, to provide for their family. Likewise those who serve in the military know what it means to put duty to country before one's self. But today the culture has promoted the idea that if you do what you love, it will never feel like work. The sense of duty and obligation is minimized in this generation.

How much are you driven by doing what is right? We like to emphasize God's grace, but what about our calling to be righteous? We have a duty to pursue God's wisdom and follow His will, not because it benefits us, but because it's right. Why do you take care of your siblings or your parents? Because it's the right thing to do. Why do you obey and submit to the government, your parents, and even your boss? Because it's the right thing to do. Why do you obey the law? Because it's right. Why are you faithful to your spouse, even if they do not provide the intimacy you need? Are you honest in school, even if cheaters don't get caught? We are called to righteousness because it's right, not because we will benefit.

When we think about the Old Testament Law, we often try to rationalize why each rule was for the benefit of the Israelites. It seems reasonable that cleanliness rules were for the health of the community, and likely some of these would have been common sense to the Israelites. But what about rules against eating shellfish, cutting sideburns, or wearing cloth of mixed fiber? These have no logical benefit for Israel, and they seem almost arbitrary. Israel had to obey because God's word is supreme, just as 8:4 says of the king. God wanted them to obey commands that had no obvious benefit to them in order that they learn to submit to His will and acknowledge His supremacy, wisdom, and holiness. In Eden the forbidden fruit looked similar to all the others, there was no obvious reason not to eat it. Yet God commanded them not to eat it, and He wanted them to submit to Him. The fruit itself was not poison, but their rebellion against God's authority led to their downfall. So let us pursue wisdom and obey God, not for our own benefit, but because it is right.