

# **Living a Meaningful Life**

## **Use Wisdom but Know Its Limitations**

*Ecclesiastes 8:1-17*

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# Use Wisdom but Know Its Limitations

## Scripture

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes addresses the use of wisdom but also being aware of its limitations.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 8:1-17:

**<sup>1</sup> Who is like the wise?**

**And who knows the interpretation of a thing?**

**A man's wisdom makes his face shine,**

**and the hardness of his face is changed.**

**<sup>2</sup> I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. <sup>3</sup> Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. <sup>4</sup> For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" <sup>5</sup> Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. <sup>6</sup> For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. <sup>7</sup> For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? <sup>8</sup> No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. <sup>9</sup> 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.**

**<sup>10</sup> Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. <sup>11</sup> Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. <sup>12</sup> Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. <sup>13</sup> But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear be-**

fore God.

<sup>14</sup> There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. <sup>15</sup> And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

<sup>16</sup> When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, <sup>17</sup> then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. (Ecclesiastes 8:1-17)

## Introduction

Helmuth von Moltke was drafted to work in counterintelligence for Nazi German. Yet his Christian faith made him a staunch opponent of Adolf Hitler. Von Moltke believed it was wrong for him to use violent force against the Nazis. Nevertheless, he used his high position to rescue many prisoners from certain death. Not surprisingly, he was eventually accused of treason, put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to die.

In his final letter home to his beloved wife Freya, Von Moltke described the dramatic moment at his trial when the judge launched into a tirade against his faith in Christ. "Only in one respect does National Socialism resemble Christianity," he shouted. "We also demand the whole man."

Then the judge asked Von Moltke to declare his ultimate loyalty: "From whom do you take your orders? From the other world or from Adolf Hitler? Where lie your loyalty and your faith?"

Von Moltke knew exactly where his loyalty lay. He had put all his hope and trust in Jesus Christ. Therefore, he stood before his

earthly judge as a Christian and nothing else. His faith had enabled him to act wisely in government service, and now it enabled him to act wisely when he faced his final hour. As a believer in Christ, Von Moltke understood the difference between the proper exercise of authority and the abuse of power. He also knew the wise course of action when he was under someone else's control and in danger of his very life.<sup>1</sup>

The Preacher who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes considered the matter of submission to authority. He was aware that God set up kings and authorities, and he discussed how people are to relate to civil authorities.

## Lesson

In our text for today, the Preacher gives a lot of practical instruction regarding how to relate to civil authority, whether good or evil, even in matters of life and death.

And so in today's lesson we are encouraged to use wisdom but know its limitations—particularly with respect to civil authority.

### I. The Basis of the Instructions (8:1)

The Preacher's instructions are based on wisdom, and so in verse 1 he exalts the wise man and the wisdom he possesses.

The Preacher asks in verse 1a, **“Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?”** One could also read the verse as follows, **“Who is [as blessed as] the wise [man]? And who knows the [explanation] of a thing?”**

A wise person's understanding of things is reflected in his face. That is why the Preacher says in verse 1b, **“A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.”**

*Really?* You might be tempted to ask. *Is a wise person's face*

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 181-182.

*really different from any other person's face?* Yes, it is.

Think of Daniel. He was led into Babylonian captivity as a young teenager. Eventually, because of his wisdom he was selected to receive special training. But Daniel and his friends were wise and requested that they not eat the king's food, which had most likely been offered to their gods. "At the end of ten days it was seen that they were *better in appearance*. . . than all the youths who ate the king's food" (Daniel 1:15, emphasis added).

It is strange but true: godly wisdom makes a difference even in the way people look. Let me give you a striking contemporary example of this truth that the Preacher gives us in Ecclesiastes.

A prominent atheist named Matthew Parris wrote in a 2008 essay about a strange phenomenon that he had observed in Africa. Amazingly, as an atheist, he wrote an essay for *The Times* titled, "Why Africa Needs God." Although Parris made it clear that he does not believe in God at all, he admitted that Christianity made a tangible difference in the lives of people he knew in his boyhood home of Malawi and in other countries across Africa. Not only did he admire the good work that Christians were doing to care for the poor and sick, but he also liked the way they looked. "The Christians were different," he wrote. "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*" (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Biblical wisdom brings personal transformation.

## **II. The Instructions (8:2-17)**

A person who is wise will follow the six instructions that the Preacher set down in the rest of the chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Parris, "As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God," *TimesOnline*, December 27, 2008; [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew\\_parris/article5400568.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew_parris/article5400568.ece).

A. *Obey Civil Authorities (8:2)*

The first instruction is: obey civil authorities.

The Preacher says in verse 2, **“I say: Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him.”**

The reason we obey civil authorities is because they are God’s representatives. Jesus told his disciples to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Luke 20:25). The Apostle Paul said in Romans 13:1-2, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

One of the ways in which godly, wise believers show obedience to Christ is by obeying the authorities that God has set up in place.

People sometimes wonder if there is ever a place for civil disobedience. People have questions such as, “Must I always submit to the civil authorities, or are there times when it is my duty as a Christian to disobey?” The simple answer is the one that Peter gave when the authorities in Jerusalem told him to stop preaching the gospel, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). When civil authorities are in conflict with God’s law, then we always disobey civil authorities and obey God.

B. *Civil Authorities Cannot Be Easily Resisted (8:3-4)*

The second instruction is: civil authorities cannot be easily resisted.

The Preacher says in verses 3-4, **“Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”**

Even though civil authorities rarely acknowledge it, they rule by God’s permission. In fact, the authority of God is behind the

civil authority. And, ordinarily, civil authorities have significant power. So, it is not easy to resist civil authorities.

That is not to say that there is never a time to fight against an unjust, tyrannical civil authority. Some may do it through peaceful means, like Helmuth von Moltke, who resisted Hitler at every turn and who refused to resort to violence because he thought that this would make him little better than a Nazi.

And there is even a time to resist unjust, tyrannical civil authorities by the proper use of force. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, did believe that force was justified in getting rid of Hitler.

*C. Obedience to Civil Authorities Will Not Bring Punishment (8:5a)*

The third instruction is: obedience to civil authorities will not bring punishment.

The Preacher says in verse 5a, **“Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing. . . .”**

This is not an absolute promise. It is, however, a general principle. Ordinarily, obedience brings blessing. And, of course, disobedience brings punishment. Submitting to the rule of law will keep us safe from harm.

*D. There Is a Time and Judgment for Every Matter (8:5b-9)*

The fourth instruction is: there is a time and judgment for every matter.

The Preacher says in verses 5b-9, **“. . . and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from 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.”**

A wise person knows that there is a time for God to judge every matter. So, when he is oppressed by an unjust civil authority, he can bear it because he knows that one day God will set all wrong right.

We think of believers who live in countries where they are persecuted simply because they are followers of Jesus Christ. Their trouble lies heavy on them. Yet, they know that one day God set all things right.

*E. There Are Three Reasons Why the Righteous Should Patiently Endure the Oppression of Wicked Authorities (8:10-13)*

The fifth instruction is: there are three reasons why the righteous should patiently endure the oppression of wicked authorities.

*First, the wicked eventually die and will be forgotten.* The Preacher says in verse 10, **“Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.”**

Wicked authorities eventually die. People who supported what they did praised them in the city where they had done their wicked deeds. But they eventually died.

The reason wicked authorities continue in their wickedness is because God delays judgment against them. The Preacher says in verse 11, **“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.”** Delayed justice often causes wicked authorities to believe that there will be no judgment.

But, God’s patience is designed to give sinners time to repent and to avoid the judgment that is to come. Listen to the warning the Apostle Paul gives in Romans 2:4-5, “Or do you presume on the riches of his [i.e., God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righ-

teous judgment will be revealed.”

*Second, the righteous will come out all right.* The Preacher says in verse 12, **“Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.”**

Sinners may think that all is well with them because they are living a long life and they seem to be prosperous. However, the fact is that when the righteous die, all their troubles will be over. All wrongs will be corrected for the righteous person.

*On the other hand, third, the wicked will not come out all right.* The Preacher says in verse 13, **“But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.”**

Former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, David Hubbard, tells the story of when he and his wife, Ruth, watched a TV show. It was one of Alfred Hitchcock’s best. He said that twenty years later he could still vividly remember each scene.

The half-hour television drama on an old black-and-white set began with a couple chatting cordially as they drove through a country town. Their peaceful drive was interrupted by the shriek of a siren and the flashing of lights behind them. As they slowed their car in response, the police vehicle lurched past them and then cut in front of them forcing their car into a low concrete wall at the edge of the road.

In shock they climbed out and discovered the bump had broken their right front wheel. They turned to protest the matter to the policemen who were now at their side, when one of the burly policemen hit the bewildered man in the face.

“You saw him start to swing at me, didn’t you?” he growled to his partner, whose gruff response was, “I sure did!”

David Hubbard said that he and his wife could feel their outrage heat to boiling point and beyond as they watched the next scene unfold. The tow truck came along and hauled the car to the garage where an outrageously high fee was quoted for the towing and repairs. The incensed couple was dragged to the office of the

Justice of the Peace, where all their protests fell on deaf ears and an exorbitant fine was levied for their alleged speeding and assault. It was obvious that the whole crew—police, truck driver, mechanic, and judge—were in cahoots.

The Hubbards watched in disbelief as the shattered couple, demeaned, defrauded, and downcast, climbed into the car to make their way out of that wicked and unjust town.

Everything in us wants to shout out, “That’s not fair! Life ought not to be that way. Is there no justice to be found?”

Then, as the couple eased their way out of town, the man asked the woman, “Did you get all that?”

She opened her purse, pulled out a compact tape recorder, and began to replay the entire scenario. The question about justice was answered with a resounding “Yes!”

The couple, you see, were government agents investigating reports of corruption in that little town. Now, they had hard evidence. Vindication was on the way.

God has a giant recorder, recording everything that is ever said and done in this world. One day, the wicked will stand before him, and the recording of all their wicked actions will be played for them to see. Justice will be served in the end.

*F. Consider That God’s Ways Cannot Be Fully Understood (8:14-17)*

The sixth and final instruction is: consider that God’s ways cannot be fully understood.

*First, notice the vanity seen.* The Preacher says in verse 14, **“There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.”**

The Preacher has noted this before. The wicked seem to enjoy prosperity and long life, while the righteous seem to suffer.

This is a vanity. It is futile, according to the Preacher.

*And second, notice the conclusions reached.* The godly person should seek to enjoy life in spite of the inconsistencies observed. The Preacher says in verse 15, **“And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.”**

Further, the godly person should acknowledge that he is not able to fathom all of God’s doings. The Preacher says in verses 16-17, **“When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one’s eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.”**

### Conclusion

The Preacher has shown us that although we should use wisdom to survive in this world, wisdom has limitations. It does not enable us to know all the work of God. We have to learn to live with our limitations. We simply cannot comprehend “all the work of God.” Although as believers we must use our God-given wisdom in this life, we must also accept the fact that life on earth sometimes presents us with mysteries we simply cannot fathom.

The hymn-writer, William Cowper, put it this way:

God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill  
He treasures up his bright designs, and works his sovereign will.

Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

You have given your people wisdom. You call us to live by wisdom in this world. However, even though we use the wisdom that you have given to us, we still do not comprehend “all the work of God.”

Help us to trust you—even when you move in a mysterious way your wonders to perform.

And all of this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.