

Good Order in Government

Ecclesiastes 10:4-7; 1 Corinthians 10:40

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Without government in the home, the workplace, the church, and the nation, anarchy and the whim and will of the masses will rule. There is indeed an ungodly tyranny that may be laid on the shoulders of subjects by rulers who rule not according to God's Law, but there is also a disorderly anarchy that may be laid on the shoulders of rulers by subjects who are not content with the direction or decisions of rulers. Government in its proper administration is simply applying God's order to the world in which we live. Government is a blessed gift of God to us who dwell on the earth.

There are sins and errors that may be committed by those who rule and by those who are ruled, which contribute to disorder within God's ordained institutions. Disorder leads to confusion, contention, and division within the family, church, or nation. God makes it abundantly clear that He "is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33). Therefore, we who call ourselves the children of God are to imitate the order of our God as that beautiful order is revealed in creation, providence, and redemption, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Dear ones, Divine order in your life is maintained when you out of love for God, for your neighbor, for God's truth, and for God's holiness seek to be servants (regardless of your calling), fulfilling your duties one to another. Husbands should serve their wives, as well as wives their husbands. Parents should serve their children, as well as children their parents. Elders should serve the sheep, as well as the sheep their lawful elders. Magistrates should serve the people, as well as the people their lawful magistrates. When each one individually has a diligent care within the family to serve one another in love within your own calling, you will have an orderly family (as well as an orderly church and an orderly nation). You desperately need the heart of a servant like that of Christ, who (though being the Son of God) came with the purpose to serve, rather than to be served. When you cease to serve one another in love within your calling (whether it be to rule or to be ruled), there will disorder appear. There the institution of God will suffer a breakdown and you as individuals will suffer great heartache and grief in body and soul. None can flagrantly violate God's order without suffering serious and grave consequences within God's institutions and within your own personal lives.

So I ask you: Do you love and desire the order God has established in the world (whether it be in your individual life, the family, the workplace, the church, and the state)? Do you only look at how others violate God's order, or are you likewise seeing in your thoughts, words, and conduct how you yourself also bring disorder into your own and other's lives by not being a servant in fulfilling your duties within your own calling? Disorder brings pain and chaos. Order brings blessing and peace. Let us consider this Lord's Day how the Lord would have us to promote His order in our world as found in our text today: (1) God's Order Is Promoted by the Grace of Self-Control (Ecclesiastes 10:4); and (2) God's Order Is Promoted by the Grace of Contentment (Ecclesiastes 10:5-7).

I. God's Order Is Promoted by the Grace of Self-Control (Ecclesiastes 10:4).

A. In the previous section (Ecclesiastes 10:1-3), the Preacher (Solomon) demonstrated that it is often the so-called "little sins" that stain one's reputation and set him/her up for a fall into a very conspicuous, public sin that everyone sees. Just as small dead flies can cause a fragrant ointment to stink, so sins of omission and sins of carelessness can putrefy the character of one, who otherwise has a good reputation. Thus, the need in your life is to be ever vigilant and watchful that you enter not into temptation, for the spirit may be willing, the flesh is very weak (Matthew 26:41).

B. Solomon now moves (in Ecclesiastes 10:4-7) to show another way in which you should be watchful, particularly as it relates to the matter of good order and government. For you can cause your reputation to stink, not only by those little foxes (or sins) that spoil the vine, but also by acting like a bull in a tea shop (by way of your careless speech and conduct), and thus promote disorder of every kind.

C. Solomon specifically addresses the way in which one who is under government ought to control himself/herself with one who exercises lawful government (even when the ruler allows his passions to be sinfully exposed): “If the spirit [or passion—GLP] of the ruler rise up [that is, his passion sinfully ascends in volume and in intensity—GLP] against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offenses.” When one who is in authority loses control of his speech and conduct, you who are under authority are not to follow suit, by likewise losing control of your speech and conduct. Just because a husband, a parent, a boss, an elder, or a magistrate shows no self-restraint in speaking to you, is no reason for you to imitate his/her absence of self-control. For if both parties allow their passions to pour forth like water through a broken dam, then all order is broken down and damage of the worst kind is sure to follow. The sinful anger of the ruler is not excused simply because he has authority to rule. However, a sinful response to the ruler only brings the building down upon the heads of all. This is a duty that is given a second time by Solomon (the first in Ecclesiastes 8:3), so the repetition must be of great importance to the Holy Spirit. Solomon issues both a command and a reason that should guide you in the hypothetical situation of sinful anger directed toward you by those who have authority in Ecclesiastes 10:4.

1. First, hear the command from the Spirit of God speaking through His prophet, Solomon: “leave not thy place.” Rather than stomping off in a fit of anger at the way the ruler has treated you, Solomon says (in effect): “Control yourself and maintain your loyalty to the ruler in not abandoning your place of lawful submission.” That’s your Divine duty and mine in promoting order rather than disorder in the family, the workplace, the church, or the nation. Is there anything more difficult to do than to maintain (by your words and deeds) your loyalty to those in lawful authority over you as they lash out at you with hurtful, hateful, and scornful words? Is there anything that tests your maturity and growth in Christ more than to face bitter words and to refuse to retaliate when you have been reviled (whether by peers, superiors, or inferiors)? Here is where the grace of self-control is found to be a fruit of the Spirit, rather than a mere fruit of one’s personality. For, dear ones, your natural and sinful reaction is to want to let one have it with both barrels when you are mistreated and reviled. But the true grace of self-control is that which was manifested by Christ (“who when he was reviled, reviled not again” 1 Peter 2:23). Is the grace of self-control being manifested in your life when you are verbally attacked and humiliated? If not, it is clear why there is chaos and disorder in the home, at work, or in the church. For as long as you maintain control of your passions and words, there is at least order within your own life individually, and at least some degree of order yet maintained in the relationship you have with that person. But when you retaliate, the floodgates are opened and there is no way to tell how much destruction will follow.

a. Does this approach of self-control not teach the offender to perpetuate the same behavior toward you repeatedly? Does this approach not make you a mere doormat upon which everyone learns to wipe their dirty shoes? It is certainly possible that your self-control may not cool off the hot passions of the other person, but rather only incite him/her to greater anger as you steadfastly refuse to retaliate or fight in like manner. However, regardless of the consequences that may follow from the exercise of self-control, it is yet a commanded duty given to you by God in order to promote order in government (beginning with governing your own tongue and your own reaction). For, dear ones, you are not really ready to govern others effectively, until you have first learned to govern yourself. Victory over yourself is even greater than victory over your enemies (according to Proverbs 16:32). Only the one who first learns how to submit in the exercise of self-control to those who have lawful authority will know how to rule others as a servant-leader (like Christ).

b. The grace of self-restraint or self-control does not mean there is not a proper time to come back to discuss or even humbly correct those in authority (who have abused that authority in the way they have verbally attacked you). Self-restraint and self-control wait for the best time to address the matter. The important truth communicated by Solomon about this duty of not leaving the place when the ruler's passions are directed toward you is that you do not simply cast off submission to lawful authority (even when such a sinful weakness is directed toward you).

c. The grace of self-restraint or self-control does not mean that you cannot flee the wrath of the ruler (David fled the wrath of Saul; the apostles were commanded by Christ to flee the wrath and persecution of wicked magistrates; the Sixth Commandment authorizes you to protect and defend yourself, especially against bodily harm). In some cases (as when sinful anger flares up in the home), it may be wise to walk away (if possible) from the wrath and bitter words of others, so as to exercise control of your own tongue, rather than to remain in the visible presence of sinful anger directed toward you. To humbly walk away or to excuse yourself (if you can) when you are verbally attacked may likewise be an exercise in self-restraint when you feel like retaliating. In other cases (as when your boss at work loses control), you may not be able to walk away, but you may have to endure his sinful anger at the moment and look for the right time to address it later.

2. Second, hear the reason given by Solomon for the command: "for yielding pacifieth great offenses." The reason for exercising self-control and not retaliating is that "yielding" (or literally, "healing") pacifies the offense you have suffered. In other words, fighting and bruising the one who bruised you by his words will not bring order and peace into a relationship. To the contrary, retaliating will destroy good order and government in any sphere. However, healing by your words and deeds will bring order out of disorder and peace out of chaos. The Holy Spirit (speaking through Solomon) does not give you a mere neutral attitude to maintain toward people who whip you with their tongues, but rather says that the reason you are not to leave your place of service to others when their passions explode is that your attitude, words, and behavior in desiring to heal the relationship will have the effect and consequence of cooling the person off—if not immediately, then eventually (Proverbs 25:15). Listen to the response of Saul to David, when David did not retaliate against Saul (1 Samuel 24:17; 1 Samuel 26:21).

a. This "yielding" does not arise from the fear of man, but rather arises from a true courage in using the strength which God graciously gives you to heal a relationship by serving others, rather than by using your own strength to crush those who offend you.

b. This "yielding" is not a mere determination or resolve on the part of man to pursue healing rather than retaliating. This is the supernatural grace of God manifesting itself in your desires, words, and deeds. When you feel like crushing someone, but God shows you how He has spared you thousands of times from being crushed by Him (for your many offenses against Him), the heart that is truly touched by God's grace cannot help but be humbled before God, rather than proudly retaliating in vengeance ("No one says that to me or treats me that way"). God's grace makes you a servant to heal relationships, rather than an avenger to destroy relationships (even when others grievously mistreat you).

D. How do you learn to maintain your loyal service and to yield your passions in order to promote healing against those who speak evil of you?

1. Plead with Christ for the grace of self-control. There is no help in the arm of flesh.
2. Know and acknowledge before God your sinful weakness to retaliate.
3. Prepare yourself in advance of such potentially explosive situations by walking through in your own mind how you plan to respond by God's grace.
4. Learn to say nothing until your passions are under control (James 1:19-20).
5. Learn to be a servant rather than an avenger (God is the avenger, Romans 12:19). Desire and pray for the healing of the offender. Pity him/her instead of hating and despising him/her.

6. Remember the mercy of God shown to you. Realize that if God did not restrain your sinful anger moment by moment, you would be out of control continually.

II. God's Order Is Promoted by the Grace of Contentment (Ecclesiastes 10:5-7).

A. Solomon, having first addressed the need you have of self-control in order to preserve good order in relationships and good government in God's ordained institutions (of family, church, and state), now proceeds to address the need you have of contentment with your lot in life, and specifically with the lot God has given to you in your callings (either to rule or to be ruled).

B. Solomon understands that disorder in God's institutions of family, church, and state come not only from lacking the grace of self-control, but also from lacking the grace of godly contentment. For, dear ones, when you are not content with what God has given to you in this life (or where God has you in this life), disorder, disruption, and contention in oneself (and with others) will inevitably be the result. Mark it down, discontentment breeds disorder. Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 10:5: "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler." The evil and error here in view is one (according to Solomon) that proceeds from the ruler himself. At least in the specific circumstance that Solomon observed, this evil and error was evidenced as issuing forth from the ruler (although as will be noted, it may also come from those who are ruled as well).

C. What is it that specifically proceeds from the ruler? Exalting unqualified people to places of authority: "Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low places. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth" (Ecclesiastes 10:6-7). Here is a recipe for disorder in God's institutions. In Ecclesiastes 10:6, Solomon says that fools exalt themselves and are exalted to places of dignity, while those who are rich in wisdom become outcasts. Since the rich are here contrasted with the fools, it is not likely that Solomon has in view those who are rich in possessions, but rather those who are rich in wisdom. In Ecclesiastes 10:7, Solomon continues by saying that he has even observed this disorder in government (and disruption in good order) by those who are only fit to be servants (though they ride upon horses of power), while those who are fit to be princes are walking as servants. In other words, those who are qualified to rule are cast out or ignored, while those who are not qualified to rule exalt themselves and are exalted to places of rule and authority. When this occurs, God's institutions cannot promote good order or government, for it is like putting a child behind the steering wheel and in the driver's seat. Just as that child has no business driving and will almost certainly destroy the car and the lives of others, so will those who are not fit to rule likewise do when placed behind the steering wheel of power and in the driver's seat of authority.

D. The evil and error of the ruler is exposed by Solomon in exalting unfit men to places of authority, but why does he do so? What motivates rulers to exalt the foolish? There may be different reasons suggested, but let me mention as a root reason that of discontentment: discontentment with too few rulers to share the responsibility with him, or discontentment in not having the approval of friends who want to be exalted to places of authority. Let's briefly consider this discontentment that leads to putting those who are unfit into places of authority.

1. Discontentment with so few rulers. Because the job is huge and the need is great, rulers may demonstrate their discontentment with God's providence by setting unqualified men into office before they are ready to serve and to rule. A ruler cannot be faulted for desiring to have more rulers to serve God's people in the church, but it is a discontentment on the part of ministers and elders within the church to disregard the time needed to see the fruits of loving leadership in both knowledge and wisdom, simply because there is a need. Encouraging men to strive to be godly leaders, praying for godly leaders, and training

godly leaders will certainly be necessary. But learning godly contentment (on the part of ministers and elders) so as not to lay hands suddenly upon any man (1 Timothy 5:22) is also necessary. Such a discontentment in not patiently waiting upon God's good providence and God's right timing will lead to disorder in God's institutions.

2. Discontentment in not having the favor or approval of friends. Here is a huge temptation for rulers, namely that of exalting to places of leadership those whose approval is desired. Rulers so often place those in leadership as a mere favor. It is not because certain ones evidence they are fit to serve God and God's people, but rather because they desire the continued friendship or desire simply to reward that friendship with a position of leadership. Thus, they desire the approval of their friends more than the approval of God (which is an evidence of discontentment). Godly contentment does not need the approval of others, but only needs the approval of God (John 12:43). Those who are only content when they have the approval of men will not be willing to stand for Christ against the tide of errors of others or against desiring the approval of others. Their peace and contentment in life are all wrapped up in how others view them, rather than in how God views them.

E. Just as discontentment (on the part of those who rule) may cause disorder, so discontentment (on the part of those who are being ruled) may also cause disorder, disruption, and contention in family, workplace, church, and state. When people are discontent with serving God and others in lowly places (rather than in exalted places), they begin to promote themselves to others, and boast or draw attention to their knowledge and gifts in either conspicuous or in subtle ways. Although it is a good thing for a man to desire to be an elder in Christ's Church (1 Timothy 3:1), it is not a good thing to be discontent with the place where God has you presently in serving God's people and proving yourself faithful in the little things, in order that you may be later proved to be faithful in greater things (1 Timothy 3:10). Those who are discontent are also impatient. They want what they want right now, and any delay only heightens their discontentment, because their contentment is not rooted in Christ (but is rather rooted in leadership or in whatever that person may not have and yet wants). Dear ones, again discontentment will destroy all good order and government, for one who is discontent cannot be pleased, no matter what he receives. The root problem is that he has not found and is not enjoying that lasting contentment that is found in Christ alone.

F. As noted on my previous occasions, joy and happiness flow from a heart that finds its peace and contentment not in the pleasures of the world, not in the relationships in this world, not in the possessions in this world, but in Christ and Christ alone. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Dear ones, what would you have to put in the place of Christ in that verse? For to me to live is power, prestige, possessions, pleasure, family, or friends? Whatever you put in the place of Christ will rob you of the joy of the Lord, for whatever that is will be the very thing you expect to bring you contentment and satisfaction. But that which is perishable cannot give you an enduring and everlasting contentment. You cannot expect to find peace and contentment in this life if you live for the approval of others. For like everything else in this life, the approval of people comes and goes. It is here today and gone tomorrow. If you think that having and holding that position at work, that academic degree, that financial security, that house or car, that measure of health, or that approval or love from others is what will bring that inner peace and contentment, you have deluded and deceived yourself. Those blessings just mentioned may bring a temporary enjoyment, but they will quickly fade as you struggle to gain more of that blessing or to hold more tightly to that blessing (for fear of losing it now or when you die). However, when Jesus Christ is your life and reason for living, the grace of contentment grows within you, for you know that God loves you with an everlasting love that was evidenced in offering His own beloved Son to rescue you from sin and death, and to give you forgiveness, righteousness, and everlasting life. You know that the God who loves you perfectly and completely is the very One who ordains all that comes into your life for your good and His glory, and that He can do you no wrong. You may not know what tomorrow holds, but you know who holds tomorrow, so that

you need not fear what man can do unto you (Hebrews 13:5-6). You are not content, dear ones, because you have all that you want or because you can hold on to all that you have so as never to lose it. To the contrary, you are content because you know with a certain confidence that Christ is all that you need and that He will never leave you nor forsake you. That is why you can enjoy a true lasting peace and contentment in this life, regardless of your status or position in this life. Turn to Christ today and find in Him your peace, your contentment, and your everlasting satisfaction.

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