

The Returns of Tearing Down What Is Built

Ecclesiastes 10:8-11; Proverbs 18:19

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There is a sinful pride in us all that manifests itself in thinking that we could do a better job than this person or that person (whether it is in preaching, governing, painting, cooking, keeping house, raising children, defending a point of doctrine, driving the car, fixing something in the house, playing a game, and on and on). And so because we could do a better job, we promote ourselves to others under the guise of wanting to help them. Bottom line so often is that we are not happy unless something is done our way, and if it is not done our way, we are often offended, hurt, defensive, and even angry.

It may be true that you can do a better job at something than your husband or wife, than your parents, than your boss, than your Pastor or Elders, but you do not tear down the house, the workplace, or the church just because you believe you could do a job more efficiently or might have better results than those who are in places of authority over you. Such steps to correct or improve something in the home, workplace, or church, may even be properly motivated, but there is a right way and a wrong way to seek to bring about that change that you believe needs to be made. The right way is not to destroy what you are seeking to build. The right way is not to destroy the home, the job, or the church over matters that you believe need to be improved. You don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. You don't destroy the foundation of a house just because the house needs to be painted.

For if you destroy what God has built (even if you believe there are ways to improve or correct what has been built), God will bring upon your own head the destruction you have brought to the home, the workplace, or the church. In your discontentment and dissatisfaction with people (whom you believe need to change), take not the approach of destroying them in order to bring about that change. God through His prophet and preacher, Solomon, has some very choice words for those who take such an approach, due to their own wicked pride and discontentment. Let us consider from our text this Lord's Day the following main points in Ecclesiastes 10:8-11: (1) What You Do to Others, God Will Return to You (Ecclesiastes 10:8-9); (2) What You Do to Others Must Be Exercised in Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 10:10-11).

I. What You Do to Others, God Will Return to You (Ecclesiastes 10:8-9).

A. In the previous sermon, we considered the inspired words of Solomon from Ecclesiastes 10:4-7, in which Solomon identifies two graces needed in order to have good order and good government (whether in your own individual life, or in your home, or in the workplace, or in the church, or in the state): self-control and godly contentment. Without these two heavenly graces, you will see continual disorder and chaos manifested in the various institutions that God has ordained for your good.

B. Solomon continues along the same general theme of good order and good government that he had addressed in the previous section, but now gives both a warning (in verses 8-9) and an exhortation (in verses 10-11). Let us first consider God's warning to us that we may not only hear it with our external ears, but heed it by applying it in our lives—not only being hearers of His Word, but doers of it as well.

C. Solomon gives four separate graphic pictures in Ecclesiastes 10:8-9 that are intended to give essentially one and the same warning: the evil you do to others will fall upon your own head—that which one sows in doing evil to others, he/she will also reap (Galatians 6:7). Since these verbal pictures fall within the section dealing with good government, there is a natural connection between what is given in these pictures as it relates to the warning (namely, the evil you do to others will fall upon your own head) and between what

was said earlier by Solomon (in Ecclesiastes 10:4-7) as it relates to how you are to promote good order and government in the institutions of the home, church, and state. Thus, the Lord states that such sins committed against others have an earthly recompense of misery here and now (even before we all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ). It is very serious business to the Lord to plot the demise of an institution of God that is faithful, or to plan the downfall of a brother or sister (or even eagerly to hope for their destruction). This is not the spirit of Christ, but rather than spirit of the devil. Consider each of the pictures painted by Solomon that set forth the same warning.

1. Solomon draws the first picture in Ecclesiastes 10:8a: “He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it.” This first picture envisions one who acts as a hunter digging a hole in the ground in order to craftily trap or ensnare one whom he intends to bring down. This is what the Jewish religious leaders sought to do many times over with Christ by their ensnaring questions, as we see in Matthew 22:15.

a. When questions are asked, not to sincerely gain information from others, but in order to catch others in their words, for the purpose of using those answers against them, you have dug a pit for them. This destroys all trust and confidence in good order and good government in your home or in the church. Listen to the words of David in Psalm 7:14-16 and to the words of Solomon in Proverbs 26:24-27.

b. When members of a church begin conversations with leading questions and flattering words that tend to cast doubt on other members or on the elders and their government, watch out. There may be a trap being set to draw you into the plots of others, who are discontent with the direction, government, or leadership of the church.

c. When members of the church are sharing with you the faults of others, rather than going to the alleged offenders, beware—lest a hole be dug to catch you in their criticism of others.

d. What should you do when you have sincere questions about members or the elders and their government? You should go to them with your sincere questions privately and ask them, rather than forming secret groups within the church. The one way promotes distrust—the other way promotes trust. The one way is the deceitful way of Absalom in secretly stealing away the hearts of the people—the other way is the sincere way of Christ, who states (in Matthew 18) that you should seek to go to a brother privately and keep the circle of people as small and narrow as possible before bringing others into the same knowledge. The one way promotes disorder—the other way promotes good order.

e. The warning of Solomon is that those who dig holes to entrap others will find that God in His amazing providence will cause them to fall into the very hole they intended for others—the Lord will cause the evil intended toward others to ensnare those who dug the hole. Be warned, dear ones, that you be not deceitful and cunning with one another, but rather be sincere and speak the truth in love.

2. The second picture is stated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 10:8b: “and whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.” This pictures one breaking down a hedge-like wall that has been established in order to protect crops from being crushed and destroyed by various animals. What is this hedge? In the context in which we find this picture, Solomon is promoting good order and government. Good government is divinely appointed to protect and guard people from the attacks of many enemies, who would seek to destroy the home, the church, and the state (when lawfully constituted according to God’s Word). Good government (as invested in the hands of qualified leaders) is like that protective hedge set around God’s field (or God’s institution of family, church, or state, see Psalm 80:8-13).

a. Dear ones, are you tearing down the Divine institution of lawful government in the home or in the church by your words or deeds, or are you building up that wall around God’s field? Are you acting more like Tobiah and Sanballat in discouraging others to fortify the wall of good and lawful government, or are you acting more like Nehemiah, who called the people of God to take their working tools in one hand and their weapons in the other hand in building the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4).

b. Those that secretly come by night in order to tear down the hedge of God’s lawful government around His field are warned that they will find a serpent with a venomous bite that will be

lurking for them, which is sent by the Lord to repay them for their evil deed. Be warned, dear ones, that you do nothing to destroy the good and lawful government of home, church, and state, but rather build it up, encourage those who lead (and are qualified to lead), and lift up their arms by your prayers, by your encouragement, and by your sacrificial financial support. For once the hedge of a faithful ministry and government is gone, it may be many, many years before it is rebuilt (it was over 70 years after the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Babylonians before they were again rebuilt).

3. The third picture painted by Solomon is found in Ecclesiastes 10:9a: “Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith.” This probably has in view the removing of stones from a house that is built. To try to pull out the stones from a house will not only bring the house down, but will bring the stone down upon oneself. The house of the Lord (the Temple) is the Church of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The stones that comprise the house of the Lord are said to be “lively [i.e. living—GLP] stones” in 1 Peter 2:5 (these are those whose dead hearts to God have been made alive by the Holy Spirit). Here we find the Lord warning us through Solomon that we are not to destroy the lawful and faithful Church of Christ by destroying the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s Church. The Church is to be one building united together with many living stones, not many different denominations within the same nation.

a. Again the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s faithful Church is preserved by the Divine ordinance of Church government (even in an unsettled state of the church, and even when that form of church government must revert to a more extraordinary form in order to promote that unity).

b. Dear ones, it is the pure gospel and doctrine of Christ as applied by the Holy Spirit of God that puts those living stones into place and forms those living stones into Christ’s Church. Even an extraordinary form of church government in a period of great weakness (due to so few faithful elders and due to being separated by many miles) is yet better than no government at all in promoting the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s Church.

c. Jesus said that a house divided against itself cannot stand (Matthew 12:25). Dear ones, your criticism and your gossip, which you spread to one another about the elders or about fellow members is not building the house or Church of God, but is rather removing stones from it. Be warned that if you take steps to divide the living stones within Christ’s Church against one another and to remove or weaken the government of Christ’s Church (that holds those living stones in place) by your words or by your deeds, the Lord Himself will bring the downfall of that house upon your own heads. You will suffer for it (whether you be elders who do so or member who do so).

4. The fourth picture that Solomon draws to warn against removing good and lawful order and government from your midst is found in Ecclesiastes 10:9b: “and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.” Here we find in the illustration a scene in which one is splitting wood with an axe. Splitting wood always has the purpose and effect of dividing the whole piece into smaller pieces. Again we find a warning issued to those who set forth to divide Christ’s faithful Church into groups—one set against the other.

a. The revealed will of God is made clear in 1 Corinthians 1:10: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” However, the Holy Spirit warned that there would come those who by their false teaching would divide and cause schisms within the faithful Church of Christ: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned: and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). This was happening in the Church of Corinth (according to 1 Corinthians 11:18). But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:19 that God providentially ordains even such divisions with the church in order to make manifest those who are approved and faithful among you (and consequently those who are unapproved and unfaithful among you).

b. Splitting wood that is one into various parts is painful (whether it be a marriage, a relationship, or a church). You are likely to get chips and splinters in the eye (you might even strike your own

leg or foot). Dear ones, the force of such a division is powerful and devastating, and the effect to others will be realized in severed relationships and hindered fellowship. Therefore, take not steps down that road that will bring you to the place where you are divided against one another in your family or in the church (unless it is necessary due to a faithful stand for Christ and His truth): “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city” (Proverbs 18:19).

c. Dear ones, you must take steps not to nurse grudges against one another, not to speak evil of one another to others, but rather to be humbled before God and to see yourself as the chief of sinners (like Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15), who ever stands in need of the mercy of God, so that you extend the same mercy, pity, love, graciousness, and forgiveness to others that has been extended to you by Christ.

II. What You Do to Others Must Be Exercised in Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 10:10-11).

A. In the last two verses of our text this Lord’s Day are presented two illustrations designed to show how folly and wisdom distinguish a person in what he/she does unto others (particularly what is done to those in lawful authority). For, dear ones, we have not left the general context of good order and lawful government in Solomon’s discourse at this point. There is yet more that Solomon desires to teach us before he leaves this matter. Both of these illustrations teach the same truth: acting foolishly toward others (especially those in lawful authority) will be to your hurt, whereas acting wisely will be to your profit.

B. Solomon gives the first illustration in Ecclesiastes 10:10: “If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct.” The point that Solomon seeks to drive home is that there is much effort to little or no effect by foolishly leaning upon the arm of flesh in seeking to work for change in the lawful government that is over you.

1. Just as trying to split wood with a dull axe is foolish, for it only expends much energy in accomplishing little, so those wives who try to move their husbands or those members who try to move their elders by their own mere wit, schemes, and worldly wisdom will exhaust themselves and will have little spiritual profit to show for it (even when the goal is good). Just as Solomon teaches you not to further arouse the anger of the lawful ruler by leaving your lawful place of submission (in Ecclesiastes 10:4), but rather by yielding (or healing) the relationship through the Spirit-produced fruit of self-control, so likewise here (in Ecclesiastes 10:10) there is the same general truth being promoted: be wise not foolish in how you seek to bring reformation in the home, in the workplace, in the church, and in the state. Don’t go out with a blaze of enthusiasm and zeal, simply swinging a dull axe as hard as you can in order to promote reform or change in God’s appointed institutions. You are likely to do more harm than good—more damage than benefit. You will find yourself like the Jews of whom Paul wrote in Romans 10:2: “For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.” Blind zeal and trusting in your own hard work to get the job done (especially when it comes to promoting reformation in people or in Divine institutions) is a sure recipe for disaster and defeat. You need not only heat (zeal), but light (understanding), as was said of John the Baptist in John 5:35, that he was both “a **burning** [heat—GLP] and **shining** light”.

2. Dear ones, it is not by your natural wit, wisdom, natural gifts and resources, or by your mere hard work that you promote reformation. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” Zechariah 4:6. As Solomon has already informed us in Ecclesiastes 9:11: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to mean of skill.” Rather dear ones, you are to trust in the promise of God and use your godly efforts always looking to your own natural weakness, but to God’s omnipotent power (Isaiah 40:25-31).

3. You can become so busy in doing and even in serving others that you forget that which is most important and foundational to all of your service: humbly sitting at the feet of Christ and communing with Him (Luke 10:42). Dear ones, forget not that it is not mere knowledge that gives you direction in your

way, but it is heavenly wisdom in sharpening the axe by God's grace that directs your way in applying what you know to promote reformation (beginning with promoting reformation in your own life before seeking to promote it in the lives of others—starting at home before you promote it in the church, Luke 8:39).

B. The second illustration is to the same effect as the first illustration: "Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better" (Ecclesiastes 10:11). He who does not first charm a snake by singing or playing a musical instrument before it, in order to calm it, will be bitten by it if he seeks to take hold of it or to move it; so likewise one who seeks to take hold of or move a lawful ruler in leadership without using wisdom to first build trust will be bitten. Biblical wisdom is the application of Divine knowledge to all of life. To be puffed up with knowledge is the common pride of us all. We will not only be destroyed for lack of knowledge, but for the lack of wisdom in applying that knowledge in practicing what we profess to believe.

1. Dear ones, reformation does not come from mere knowledge, or from using a worldly wisdom, but it comes from a sanctified godly wisdom in humbly communing with Christ daily (through prayer and the study of Scripture), through humbly learning of Christ, humbly resting in Christ and His promises, humbly seeking reformation within yourself (your tongue, your eyes, your ears, your desires, and your actions), humbly seeking reformation within your family (in setting a godly example for them to follow, and in serving one another in love), and humbly seeking reformation within Christ's Church (in sound doctrine, pure worship, biblical church government, and in brotherly love).

2. Dear ones, reformation will not come through forgetful hearers of the Word, but through effectual doers of the Word (James 1:22-25).

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