

# Dealing With Powerful People

## Series on "Ecclesiastes"

Helmuth von Moltke was a young lawyer descended from German aristocracy, who in 1931 was invited to become a judge. But in order to become a judge he had to join the Nazi party, so he turned down the offer. When war began in 1939 he found himself drafted to work in counterintelligence for Nazi Germany. Because he worked for the intelligence services, he knew how people were being treated in the occupied territories. It appalled him that thousands of people were being arrested and carted off to concentration camps. The more human rights abuses he discovered, the more resolute he became in his opposition to Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. Because he was a Christian, Von Moltke had a huge dilemma. How much should he resist the governing authorities? Should he actively try and overthrow Hitler and the Nazi regime? Where was his responsibility to God to stand up and speak out against injustice, when it may well cost him his life? He came to the conclusion that it would be wrong for him to use force against the Nazis, but at great risk to himself, he used his high position in military intelligence to rescue many prisoners from certain death. In October 1941 he wrote in a letter, "Certainly more than a thousand people are murdered in this way every day, and another thousand German men are habituated to murder... What shall I say when I am asked: And what did you do during that time?" In the same letter he said, "Since Saturday the Berlin Jews are being rounded up. Then they are sent off with what they can carry.... How can anyone know these things and walk around free?"

Many Christians have to wrestle with issues of what to do when faced with powerful, corrupt and abusive people. We had a fascinating evening recently in our Home Group, when we were studying 1 Peter. We were dealing with the subject of how Christians live under persecution and cope with corruption and bribery. People in our group who were from Africa and India shared stories of how these issues were directly affecting them. They had struggled with how to act in a Christian way when they were up against powerful people who were making their lives a misery. I have heard the same thing over the years from Christian women in abusive and sometimes violent marriage relationships. How much of this do I put up with? How do I act like Christ in a situation where I feel powerless? I've shared with other Christians who work for a boss who is powerful and abusive. What do you do? Speak up? Shut up? Rebel?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 8, verses 1-9 deals with the question of authority and how to deal with oppressive rulers. In his day, rulers ruled with absolute power. They held the power of life and death in their hands, and they used that power whenever they felt like it. They were answerable to no one but themselves. Solomon, who wrote this letter, knew how the system worked. He had huge power and wealth. Every day of his reign people would come into his royal court, bowing and scraping, often wanting something from the King, or having to report on their service to the King. He was in a unique position to observe how people reacted in the presence of power and authority. Here's how he describes how people act in the presence of powerful people.

***"Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance. Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him. Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it. All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt". (Ecclesiastes 8:1-9 NIV)***

## **The Face Of Wisdom**

Solomon says wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard expression. Is this just a bit of smart secular advice that says to us that when you go before powerful people put on a happy face even if you are angry or upset? That's what the people of Belarus are doing right now. The Belarusian Dictator Alexander Lukashenka has made it a crime to applaud him, his troops or his security forces. How come? Because he has banned any form of criticism or demonstration against him, people who are opposed to him have now taken being sarcastic; smiling all the time, clapping everything he says, and laughing at everything he says that might be remotely funny. Recently, when he made his Independence Day speech, 400 people were arrested for clapping. I guess it won't be long before he passes a law to stop people smiling. The people of Belarus have found a very clever way of expressing opposition, but I don't think it's what Solomon is referring to.

I think what Solomon is getting at is that true Godly wisdom actually shows on the outside. That was true for Daniel who grew in wisdom and understanding so much that it made a difference in the way he looked. That's what grace does to us. When the love and grace of God fills our hearts, it shows on our face. In Acts Chapter 6 we read about Stephen addressing the Sanhedrin. The scripture says **"They could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke ... All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:10& 15 NIV)**

Matthew Parris is a prominent atheist in the UK. In 2008 he wrote a piece for the Times newspaper called "Why Africa Needs God". He made it clear that he doesn't believe in God at all, but on a trip back to his boyhood home in Malawi, he was impressed with all the good work Christians were doing with the poor and the sick. Not only did he admire the good work that Christians were doing, but he also liked the way they looked. This is what this atheist wrote **"The Christians were different. 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."** Godly wisdom brings transformation. The inner joy that Christ brings radiates out to other people. When you stand before powerful people, don't underestimate the way the love and grace and wisdom of God shows on your face. As God shines his face on us, so our faces will shine with the wisdom of his radiant grace.

It was Genghis Kahn who said "The greatest joy is to conquer ones enemies, to pursue them, to seize their property, to see their family in tears, to ride their horses, and to possess their daughters and wives". We may not have to live under a tyrant like that, but we do have to cope with tyrannical bosses at work. We do have to suffer teachers who abuse their authority. There are plenty of families with an abusive wife or husband or parent. There are plenty of government agencies with officials whose sole joy in life is to make life difficult for everyone else. There are plenty of lawyers who love playing dirty with the law. For some people, power over others is an addictive drug that never satisfies. As Christians, how do we live under that sort of tyrannical authority? There are different approaches we might take.

### **1. Disobedience - "Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God"**

In a lot of situations, disobedience is not an option. Not if you are in the military. Not if you want to keep your job. Not unless you want to get arrested. So how do we honour God when we are living under an ungodly authority? Solomon says "Keep the Kings command". A wise person will obey. There is a general principle here about submission to the governing authorities. Jesus taught his disciples to render to Caesar the things that are Caesars. Paul told every person to be subject to the governing authorities. This means paying our taxes and being a good citizen of our society. Why should we do that? Because it is God who sets up Kings and rulers, and when we honour the rulers over us, we honour God. Paul puts it clearly when writing to the Romans **"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" (Romans 13:1-2).**

And remember Paul wrote that at a time when one of the cruellest Emperors was ruling the Roman Empire. But what if the governing authorities are asking me to do something that is obviously contrary to the will of God? Then we must obey God rather than men. When there is a conflict between God and man, we must obey the higher authority.

### **2. Desertion - "Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence"**

In the time that Solomon wrote, a hasty departure from the presence of the King was a sign of disrespect. It was a way of turning ones back on authority. This is a warning to us to not be hasty in walking away from any authority God has put in place. It may be that we decide that in order to maintain our integrity, we have to leave a job or give up on an abusive marriage, but a decision like that should not be made in haste. Philip Ryken tells of a man in his church with a very lucrative job in a print shop, who chose to leave the job when the company began printing pornography. I remember a very Godly woman who had been married for 25 years to an unbelieving husband coming to me for help. For 25 years her husband had been involved in multiple affairs with different women, and each time she had forgiven him and taken him back. But now he was insisting he bring his latest mistress home to live with him and to share the same bed as his wife. There are times when people choose to walk away, often at great cost to themselves. But the more difficult the decision, the more we need to take time to seek the Lord and the wise counsel of others.

### **3. Defiance – "Do not stand up for a bad cause"**

When people are under an ungodly authority it's tempting to rebel in an unrighteous way. The best way to fight ungodliness is with godliness. When Daniel and his friends were commanded to worship King Nebuchadnezzar, they peacefully refused to worship anyone but God alone. I began this message by talking about Helmuth von Moltke. He resisted Hitler and the Nazis at every opportunity, but he refused to resort to violence, for he believed that that would make him no better than the Nazis. We are not to respond to evil with evil.

### **4. Discernment - ... the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter..**

It takes discernment to know the right procedure for the right time. Impulsiveness and overreaction can make the situation worse. Asking God for wisdom allows God time to show us what to do. Think about some of the Bible characters who acted with wisdom. Joseph didn't reveal who he was to his brothers until he was sure their hearts were right with their father and with their God. Nehemiah waited until God's time before getting permission from the King to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Daniel refused to eat the unclean food before him, but with wisdom suggested an alternative diet that gave God room to work miracles. There were numbers of times when the Apostles were treated in an illegal way by their persecutors, but they were willing to suffer for their faith, and the Lord honoured them for it.

I began this message telling you of Helmuth Von Moltke, a German Christian who did all he could to save others from certain death. Here is how his story ended. He was arrested by the Gestapo and charged with treason. Although innocent, he was sentenced to die. In his final letter to his wife before he was shot, he described the moment at his trial when the judge launched into a tirade against his faith in Christ. The judge asked him to declare his ultimate loyalty: "From whom do you take orders, from the other world or from Adolf Hitler? Where lie your loyalty and your faith?" Moltke knew exactly where his loyalty lay. He had put all his hope 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 service of his country, and now it enabled him to act wisely when he faced his death.

As I close I want to leave you with some verses of scripture from the book of James in the New Testament. Learn to turn these verses into prayer.

**"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given him." (James 1:5 NIV)**

**"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness". (James 3:17-18 NIV).**

**David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland**