



Ecclesiastes

(10) Government Corruption and Poverty

Ecclesiastes 5:8-9

Romans 13:1-7

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Our subject this morning is the relationship between government corruption and poverty. It is significant that the Bible quite often directs our attention to society and problems in society. The Bible is not just about personal salvation and things that affect us directly. Indeed, the Bible often addresses us as a part of various social groupings. Most fundamentally, we are seen as belonging to the people of God. But we are also viewed and addressed as members of the larger society in which we live. We are trained and shaped by our godless culture to think mostly about ourselves and our immediate concerns. And our sinful natures are bent that way anyway. But God, through his word, often directs us to think about and to care about big things like his kingdom and like the suffering of people in faraway places. Indeed, two things that are at the core of Christian spirituality are a longing to see God's kingdom prosper all around the world and love for other people. Both of those concerns draw us out of the bubble of our immediate concerns and direct our interest and attention to big-picture concerns like the good and evil in our own country and globally.

Today the author of Ecclesiastes directs our attention to the relationship between government corruption and poverty as well as the relationship between just and righteous government and economic flourishing. Verse 8, describes a corrupt government and it's the result for the poor. "If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over

them.” It is clear that he is speaking about government because he is describing a hierarchy of corruption.

The words, “the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them,” refer to a hierarchy of government officials watching each other’s backs. Craig Bartholomew interprets this as “an intricate network of corruption.” He goes on to say, “The point of one official ‘watching over’ another is that they protect each other’s backs in the maintenance of oppression.” (p.217) The result of this, according to Ecclesiastes is “the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness.” And he is saying, “If you see [this] in a province... do not be amazed at the matter...”

We should not be amazed because government corruption with its resulting “oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness,” is so common. That is what he observed in his own society. There was a lot of poverty and a lot of that poverty was the result of government corruption. What does this look like?

The prophets give us plenty of examples. Isaiah 1:23, ²³“Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them.” Micah 3:9-11, ⁹“Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, ¹⁰who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. ¹¹Its heads give judgment for a bribe....”

So, many princes and rulers were corrupt. They took bribes. And because of that the poor suffered at the hands of the rich. When rulers rule in order to become rich by abusing their power, the result of that is always the poverty of many of the people without power in the land. All of the texts that I have quoted, as well as our text in Ecclesiastes, make the connection between government corruption and poverty. The people at the bottom have a more difficult time supporting themselves when they are governed by corrupt officials. There are multiple reasons for that. When rich people pay bribes to government officials, they do so, so those government officials will favor them in their decisions, but that is always at the expense of others who therefore have a harder time getting ahead because of the corruption. And when poor people

have to pay bribes to access services that they cannot do without, they are left with even less money to support themselves and their families.

Now this remains a huge problem in our world. Government corruption is one of the leading causes of global poverty. One of the great reasons for poverty in the world is that many governments are so corrupt that their economies are dysfunctional. Poor people cannot get ahead because they can't pay the bribes that give them access to permits they need to start small businesses or because the regulations are stacked against them because of the bribes that the rich have paid to purchase preferential treatment in the market place. Corruption also means that money from taxes or foreign aid which could be used to create opportunities for the poor is often stolen by government officials, so they become rich with money that should be used to help the poor.

There is page on the website of the Government of Canada which is called "Anti-corruption in developing countries." This is how it describes the effects of corruption in developing countries. "Corruption decreases the amount of money that can be used to reduce poverty and promote economic growth. Poor people are often the hardest hit by corruption when government spending is diverted away from social programs and services, or when bribes are required to access key services."

In their book, *The Poverty of Nations*, Barry Asmus and Wayne Grudem write, "Unfortunately, the idea that rulers can just "take" money from the government's treasury for their own benefit and for the benefit of friends is a cultural value deeply entrenched in some poor societies. What we would call "corruption" is widely accepted as just 'the way government works'.... [W]hen nations are trapped in poverty, it is almost always the case that government officials and their relatives and friends increasingly become wealthy because of the power of their offices. Corruption will be widespread, and when it is discovered, it will be covered up and punished lightly, if at all. In such cases, government officials will show favoritism to some people and show bias against others."

One of the reasons that the economies of richer nations are so much better than the economies of poorer nations is that there is much less corruption. There is corruption in any government, of course. But it is

less accepted and less pervasive in some governments so that their economies are able to thrive so that most people can get work and enjoy a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. Things are not perfect in the more prosperous nations. There are always things that are bad and wrong. There is plenty of corruption in our governments as well. And there is still poverty. But we do have a lot to be thankful for. Most of us are doing very well and one of the greatest reasons for that is that God in his providence as caused us to be born in countries where government corruption is restrained enough that it is possible for the economy to work reasonably well with the result that most people work and have a comfortable life.

But corruption is always there to some extent. If you follow the news at all you will regularly hear or read stories of government officials using their positions for their own gain rather than the public good. The author of Ecclesiastes is telling us that we should not be amazed when we see this. This is the most obvious point of application in these verses and we will come back to it after we have looked at the next verse.

Verse 9 points to the way things ought to be. "But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields." Corrupt governments are not gain for a land. Their corruption results in gain for themselves and loss for the people over whom they rule. This is another example of vanity under the sun. But, "a king committed to cultivated fields," - that is gain for a land. When "a king is committed to cultivated fields," the people of the land flourish.

So, it is good for a king to be committed to cultivated fields. But what does that mean? The background here is the fact that in Israel, God had distributed the land, after the conquest, in such a way that every family had its share of the land. Having a piece of land was like having a job today. Your piece of land was the source of your food and your money. Your piece of land was the source of what you needed to live. But what happened over time is that through corruption in government, some people had their land stolen from them.

We see an example of this in the story of Naboth's Vineyard in 1 Kings 21. Naboth had a vineyard next to the palace of King Ahab. King Ahab wanted that vineyard and offered to buy it. Naboth refused because his

vineyard was the inheritance that God had given to his family and it was to be kept in the family through the generations. Ahab pouted because Naboth was unwilling to sell him the land. Jezebel his wife, trumped up a false charge against Naboth, accusing him of cursing God and the king. She had two worthless men testify that they had heard Naboth curse God and the king. He was found guilty and stoned to death. And Ahab got his vineyard.

A good king would not only not do that kind of thing, he would also make sure that no one else did it either. Proverbs 23:10–11, "¹⁰Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless, ¹¹for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you." Ancient landmarks marked the boundaries of a families' property. Moving them was a way of stealing property from an adjoining landowner. A good king would make sure that people who did that were caught and punished. A good king would protect people from the theft of their land so that they could continue to work it and supply their needs. A good king would promote justice rather than using his power for his own benefit at the expense of the poor. That is what the author of Ecclesiastes means when he says in verse 9 of our text, "But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields." By not being corrupt and using his power to maintain justice, the people of the land would prosper. They would not be exploited by the rich. Each family would have its cultivated field.

This is one of the key roles of government according to the Bible: to maintain justice, to protect the people from those who would oppress them, to help maintain the conditions in which everyone can flourish. That involves government leaders using their power and authority for the common good rather than for their own financial gain at the expense of the people of the land. That is the point of the key New Testament passage on civil government: Romans 13:1-7. That passage teaches us that governing authorities are God's servants for the common good and that one of their key roles is to punish evil-doers. That means that they are to maintain justice. They are to resist and punish those who treat others unfairly. They are to provide an environment in which people can earn a living without having to deal

with hindrances that come from the unscrupulous and corrupt both within government and outside of government.

Ecclesiastes is saying that it is gain for the land when you have a ruler who is committed to everyone flourishing as much as possible. "But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields." Within the context of Ecclesiastes, corrupt governments are one of the things about life under the sun that is vanity and problematic, while good and just governments are a real gain under the sun. Good governments can be a great means to promote human flourishing.

And we can really see the truth of that when we compare countries that have relatively just governments with countries that have corrupt governments. No government is without corruption at all, but there is a huge degree of difference between a government like ours in Canada and the governments of most developing countries that are rife with corruption. And there is a huge difference between the economic wellbeing that is the norm for most Canadians with the grinding poverty in places where governments are riddled with corruption.

Well now we come to the "so what?" What is Ecclesiastes' point in the context of the whole book? Well the point of this passage fits with the point of other similar passages that God is going to judge the world and that we cannot see the end from the beginning so that we are to fulfill our own duty to God, enjoy whatever joys that he gives us in this life and realize that we live in a world that is imperfect because of sin.

But what we will do now is reflect on this subject of the pervasiveness of corrupt and unjust governments in this world in the light of the perspective of Ecclesiastes. What does this passage, in the light of the whole book, tell us about how we should think about this terrible reality in this world that so many people are living lives of hardship and poverty because of the corruption of the governments that rule over them?

The first thing is that we should care about these issues. The author of Ecclesiastes brings up the issue of government corruption and poverty because it distresses him. He is troubled by the fact that so many government leaders are corrupt and for the suffering that this causes

among those who are poor. And this is God's word. This is something that God brings before us in these verses. It is something that should distress us that so many of the governments of this world are corrupt and that so many people of the world suffer because of it.

It is easy for us to care only about ourselves and the people who are close to us. It is easy to enjoy our prosperity in our little island of affluence in a world of corruption and poverty and just not care about anything that does not directly affect our lives. This verse and others like in the Bible remind us that the people of God are to be caring and compassionate and therefore greatly troubled by the suffering of others. That is one thing that we learn from these verses.

But while we should be disturbed by all the injustice and suffering in the world we should not be amazed by it. The one thing that this passage actually tells us to do is found in the middle of verse 8, where the author of Ecclesiastes tells us, "do not be amazed at the matter." We should not be amazed at the fact that every government in the world has some degree of corruption and most of the governments in the world are so corrupt that that is a major reason that so many of the people of the world live in poverty. We should not be amazed that a huge number of our fellow human beings live in poverty because those ruling over them are using their power and authority for their own benefit at the expense of the common good. We should not be amazed by that. Why is that?

Well the picture that Ecclesiastes paints of the world is one in which there is a great deal that is not as it ought to be. It is a world in which injustice and suffering are very common. And this is part of the biblical picture of the world. It is a sinful world and human beings are sinful creatures who are prone to exploit and oppress one another.

Government leaders are prone to use their power for their own profit at the expense of the people they are supposed to be serving. This does not mean that every single government official is corrupt, but it is very common so that all governments have some of it and many governments are so corrupt that their economies are dysfunctional, and the people trapped in poverty. We should not be surprised by this because the Bible teaches, and experience confirms, that human beings

are sinners who, given the opportunity, will very often oppress others for their own gain.

This has implications for our views of what government among sinful human beings should look like. If we should not be amazed that governments tend to be corrupt, we should favor government structures that make it more difficult for government officials to use their power in unscrupulous ways. One of the reasons that government that have less corruption are that way is that they are structured in such a way to make it difficult for individuals who have power to use their power in unjust ways. There are things like the separation of powers so that no one person has all the power and there are structures of accountability and there is the institution of the free press. These things are there because the people who designed these governments understood that government officials are sinners and they will use power corruptly if they can. There needs to be checks and balance so that people with authority are prevented as much as possible from using their authority for their own profit at the expense of the common good.

Another implication of the fact that Ecclesiastes tells us not to be amazed at the prevalence of government corruption is that we should not expect that there will ever be a utopia this side of the return of Jesus Christ. Things can get better and they can get worse, but there will always be corruption in government and there will always be people who suffer because of it. It is good for governments and citizens and Christians to seek to improve things around the world. The actions of those citizens who contributed to the development of democracy has resulted in some governments which are relatively free of corruption and we are the beneficiaries of that.

But one of the most dangerous and oppressive forms of government that the world has ever seen is communism and communism is based on utopian thinking. The theory was that if the workers could overthrow the people who controlled the wealth, you would end up with a just society in which the wealth was equally shared by all. That was utopian thinking. And it led to communist dictatorships which, in the name of overthrowing oppression, became some of the worst oppressors the

world has ever seen. We see from this that seeking equality by force results in the worst oppression of all. Trying to create a utopian society by force ends up creating a society where people are murdered in vast numbers to fulfil the vision of the ones with the power.

The author of Ecclesiastes in our text tells us not to be amazed at the prevalence of corruption in governments and at poverty that is the result. The implication of this that there will never be a perfect government and a perfect system this side of glory. It is possible to make incremental changes for the better. But what is not possible is the creation of a just society by force. Any attempts to do that in the history of the world have been brutal and have ended up being more oppressive than the governments that they sought to replace.

Now where does that leave us? It means that the world cannot be fixed by human efforts. Things can get better and things can get worse, but there will never be a time before the return of Christ when we should no longer be amazed at government corruption and the suffering that it causes to the poor. The world cannot be fixed by human efforts. We should not be amazed by these things.

Does that mean that should do nothing and just not care? Absolutely not. The final application of the book is going to be, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." So, we should keep God's commandments and do good. That can only be done through the gospel. Jesus came so that we might be renewed and so that we might be enabled to keep God's commandments and do good. And so, the life that Jesus enables us to live is a life where we are learning to love one another and a life in which we are gradually being freed from living for ourselves and increasingly learning to give ourselves in the service of God and our neighbor.

What then should our response be to the terrible injustices in the world inflicted by corrupt governments? The first thing is to live by the power of the gospel in our own spheres. Our role as Christians is to demonstrate to the world the life of the world to come. Our role as Christians is to live lives of love and sacrifice and service in our own little

spheres of influence. And then we are to extend that outward using the gifts and opportunities that God gives us. Paul writes in Galatians 6:10 "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Some Christians are given a greater sphere of influence; most of us a relatively small sphere of influence.

We can't fix the world. But we can care for the suffering of others and do something to help a few. We can by God's grace be part of the light rather than part of the darkness. And we can support the spread of the gospel at home and around the world. And we can pray and work for the coming of God's kingdom.

The biblical hope is focused on the coming of the kingdom of God. The end result of Jesus' saving work is not just the salvation of individuals, but the salvation of the world. Our hope is the renewal of all things. The church of Jesus Christ is the first fruits of that. The renewal of our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit is directly related to the renewal of all things. The power that is at work in our lives is the beginning of the new creation. There is a time coming when there will be no more corrupt governments and no more oppression because of that. We can pray that God will hasten that day.

And we can seek to live in such a way that we contribute to the flourishing of our society rather than to its injustice and selfishness. We can't change the world, but we can by God's grace demonstrate by our lives a little of the world that God is working towards. By our love and sacrifice and caring and influence we can be part of what God is doing as he fulfills his promises for a world of peace and justice and thriving for all.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God. That involves the salvation of individuals. But it also includes his reign over all the earth. And that reign will be a reign of peace and justice for all. Psalm 72:12-14, "12For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. 13He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. 14From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight."