

Ecclesiastes 8:1–9 | “How to Relate to Authority”
Preached on August 9, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 8:1–9 this morning. *[pauseeee]*

As we have seen, the book of Ecclesiastes doesn't shy away from the hard topics, but tackles them head-on.

And one such topic is 'relating to authority.' *[pauseeee]*

When it comes to authority, people tend to drift towards one of two extremes...

For some people, they listen to authority *too much*, where they will obey, even if it's wrong. *[pauseeee]*

In the early 1960s, there was an experiment done called the “Milgram Experiment.”¹ *[pause]*

The experiment set out to discover how far people would go listening to an authority figure's orders. *[pause]*

Participants were to administer electrical shocks to a person, who failed to get an answer right.

And with each wrong answer, the participant had to give increasingly higher electrical shocks to someone. *[pause]*

Here's the thing that they didn't know though: the person receiving the shocks was an actor, and the electrical shocks were fake. *[pausee]*

So what were the results?...

65% of the participants ended up administering the highest voltage shocks, even though the actor was pretending to be in agony and asking for mercy. *[pause]*

That shows us that people will often blindly follow authority, even if they ask them to do something wrong. *[pauseeee]*

Other people swing the other way: they refuse to obey authority as much as possible. *[pause]*

At Yellowstone National Park, there are signs telling you not to approach too closely to the wildlife...

Yet again and again, people have been attacked by wild animals because they refused to listen.² *[pause]*

How do *you* relate to authority? *[pause]*

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/science/Milgram-experiment>.

² <https://home.nps.gov/yell/learn/news/26014.htm>.

Do you listen, even if it's against what's right?

Or do you swing the other way, where you are constantly looking for ways to get out of obeying?
[pauseeee]

This morning, God's Word will show us how we are to relate to authority, and something that will be vital for us, no matter which way we swing, is *wisdom*. [pause]

That's what Solomon emphasizes here, we need to...

I. Value wisdom. (1)

I'll READ verse 1 for you. [READ]

Before Solomon dives into some practical instructions, he emphasizes the value of wisdom.
[pause]

In the first part of verse 1, he gives two questions, and each one is supposed to get us to reflect upon how remarkable a wise person is. [pause]

A wise person is great and rare among humanity, who often acts like fools. [pause]

When you meet a wise person, they stand out: you notice that there's something different about them.

Their mind is saturated with insight, their words drip with grace, and their decisions are thought through. [pauseeee]

A wise person is someone who knows the interpretation of things—not everything, but *many* things. [pause]

They are able to understand the meaning of things, or grasp its significance. [pause]

They see deeper than most people, while the majority of others are just staring at the surface.
[pause]

The wise person can often tell what's going on and sees what's needed. [pauseeeee]

The second part of verse 1 says, “A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.” [pause]

This teaches us that you can tell when you've met a wise person, for their wisdom causes you to notice that there's something unique about them.

Their face shines, and this doesn't mean that it is literally 'bright', but that they are pleasant, gracious, tranquil, and approachable. [pause]

You don't feel apprehensive about approaching them, wondering if they will treat you harshly, but you know that you will be met with kindness. *[pauseeee]*

Think of someone harsh and mean, and now think of someone kind and gracious...

As you think about their faces, there's probably a big difference that you can 'see.' *[pauseeee]*

Something else that Solomon notes is that the hardness of the wise man's face is changed over time, and this shows us that wisdom is *transformative*. *[pauseee]*

As a person becomes more and more wise, they become less and less harsh. *[pause]*

Before, they were stern, severe, rigid, and easily angered, but now they are gentle, gracious, and peaceful.

So wisdom is transformative in that it changes a person from the inside-out. *[pauseeee]*

This reminds us that what's in the heart can often be shown in the face. *[pauseee]*

When someone is depressed, you can often see it in their face.

So also, when someone is wise, you can tell as you interact with them—it's like you can 'see' it. *[pause]*

This is because what's in the heart eventually bubbles up to the surface. *[pauseeee]*

The wise are remarkable, for they are rare and precious, and you can tell that there's something different about them.

This is because wisdom transforms a person over time, and only God can do such a thing. *[pauseeee]*

Do you value wisdom, seeing it as essential for life? *[pauseeee]*

In order to relate well with authority, we must first value wisdom, but it can't stay there, for we must...

II. Use wisdom. (2–5)

We find this in the practical instructions found in verses 2–5, so let's READ them. *[READ]*

In the early 1950's, General Douglas MacArthur was a talented and successful general of the United States Army...

But he still needed to understand that he was a general under a commander-in-chief. *[pause]*

He went public with his disagreements with President Truman about the war, and was relieved of duty.³ [pausee]

That's an example of how we need to use wisdom when it comes to relating to those in authority over us.

We need to remember their position and power, taking that into account before we do something foolish, and face the consequences. [pauseeee]

In verses 2–5, there are multiple instructions given...

First, we see that we are to use wisdom by obeying those in authority. [pause]

Verse 2 tells us plainly: “keep the king’s command,” so a wise person obeys the commands of those in authority. [pausee]

Now, of course, if they call you to do something sinful, then you obey God over man, but otherwise, we should obey. [pause]

This relates with how the New Testament calls us “to be subject to the governing authorities.”⁴ [pauseeee]

Now in America, we don’t live under an authoritative king, but we do live under authority...

We have governmental leaders, rules and regulations, but we also have bosses at the workplace, children have parents and teachers, and so on. [pause]

In each of these cases, we should obey the commands of those in authority. [pauseeee]

Do you wisely have an obedient posture, or are you always looking for ways to skirt what someone in authority has said? [pauseeee]

The reason that Solomon gives is “because of God’s oath to him.” [pause]

Now this can also be translated, “because you took an oath before God,”⁵ and I lean toward that translation as best. [pausee]

In that day, subjects would swear loyalty to the king, and so this is what the verse is most likely talking about.

So Solomon was telling them something important: God was witness to their promise, so they needed to make sure to follow through. [pauseeee]

³ <https://www.history.com/articles/macarthur-vs-truman-the-showdown-that-changed-america>.

⁴ Romans 13:1. (See also 1 Peter 2:13.)

⁵ NIV. (Many other solid modern translations translate it this way. See the NASB, LSB, CSB, & NET.)

The truth is that even if we haven't literally taken an oath to be under someone else, God has set certain authorities over us, and therefore your obedience or disobedience is "before God."

[pause]

How would your relationship with the authorities in your life change, if you regularly reminded yourself that your obedience or lack thereof is "before God"? *[pause]*

He sees, He knows, and to disobey them is to disobey Him, so be serious and be wise by obeying authority. *[pauseeee]*

Next, as we relate to authority, we are to wisely remember that our actions speak loudly. *[pause]*

In verse 3, he says, "Be not hasty to go from his presence." *[pause]*

Imagine a servant standing before a king, but all of a sudden he gets frustrated and walks away in a huff.

What would that communicate to the king? *[pause]*

It would communicate disrespect and dissatisfaction, and who knows what a king would do in response. *[pauseeee]*

Scripture is reminding us that we need to be careful to discern what our actions communicate when we are interacting with those in authority.

Don't rashly do something that you may very well regret. *[pauseeee]*

In our anger or frustration, we can be tempted to do something rash in the sight of our boss.

Maybe it's an angry face, hands thrown up in disgust, or negative body language, but it's wisdom that helps you to be self-controlled and not hasty in what you do. *[pause]*

Wisdom says, "I know I'm frustrated, but I shouldn't just throw up my hands in disgust and bolt out the door right now." *[pause]*

That's restraint governed by wisdom. *[pauseeee]*

Consider what your actions communicate to those over you. *[pauseeee]*

Next, wisdom in relating to those in authority means being wise in determining what causes you join in. *[pause]*

The second part of verse 3 says, "Do not take your stand in an evil cause." *[pause]*

In that day, if a servant joined in some cause that would be displeasing to the king, it wouldn't go well.

So likewise, we need to wisely consider the causes we support, keeping in mind how it affects our relationship with authority. *[pauseeee]*

You shouldn't join in a cause that stirs up division in our country.

You shouldn't join in the gossip and slander of the workplace. *[pause]*

Especially when we are frustrated, we shouldn't let that drive us to join *evil* causes. *[pauseeee]*

Consider what causes you support, are they good or evil ones? *[pauseeee]*

Don't get swept up into causes because you're angry, or be carried along by the popularity of these types of things, but wisely discern what causes you support. *[pause]*

Understand that the authority over you has the power to respond how they want, for as verse 3 says, "he does whatever he pleases." *[pauseeee]*

If you joined some sort of insurrection, understand that you may very well face some jail time. *[pause]*

If you joined in slander against your boss, your boss may not trust you anymore. *[pause]*

A child will face discipline, if they join in some type of rebellious act that other kids are doing with their parents.

But verse 5 says, "Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing." *[pauseee]*

If you listen, obey, and are respectful towards those over you, then you don't have to worry. *[pause]*

This goes along with Romans 13, where Paul is talking about being subject to governing authorities...

And he says, "Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval."⁶ *[pauseee]*

Wisely think through and discern what you participate in, taking into account the position and power of those over you. *[pauseeeee]*

Next, wisdom in relating to those in authority means discerning the right time and way to do something. *[pause]*

The second half of verse 5 says, "The wise heart will know the proper time and the just way." *[pauseee]*

⁶ Romans 13:3.

A fool says and does what they want, when they want, without thinking through the consequences, but the wise considers the best time and way to do something. [pause]

Let's say that you can tell that your boss has a lot on their plate today, so you wisely choose to bring up a concern tomorrow, when they are more prone to respond well. [pause]

A fool wouldn't think through that, but just throw it in the lap of their employer, and it wouldn't go well. [pauseeee]

When we relate to those in authority, we need to use wisdom to know the best time and way to do things. [pauseeee]

In our country, maybe you have a cause that you want pushed...

Well wisdom says, "I need to be conscious of *when* and *how* I do this, so let me go through the proper channels at *this* time, not that one." [pause]

Doing this will take a lot of patience and self-control because we often want things done right away.

We want to say that thing *now*, we want to do that thing *this way*, but wisdom sometimes says, "It's best to wait, and to do it that other way." [pause]

The truth is that authorities in our lives respond better when you go through the right channels, and wait for the opportune time. [pauseeee]

A great Biblical example of this is Esther.⁷ [pause]

Queen Esther's goal was to prevent her people from being annihilated, but remember how she handled going to the king about it? [pause]

She didn't go right away to him and demand that her people not be killed, instead, she prepared a feast for the king. [pause]

Then she invited him to *another* feast the next day, and then finally requested that her people not be killed. [pauseeee]

Esther had a wise heart, which knew the proper time and way to ask something of the king.

She knew that the king would be more receptive, after honoring him, and giving him some good food and drink. [pauseeee]

When relating to authority, the manner and timing of a request is just as important as the request itself. [pause]

This takes wisdom, but trust me, it's worth it. [pauseeee]

⁷ The following is found in Esther 5-7.

So use wisdom, considering how to wisely approach and engage those who are over you.
[pauseeee]

So when it comes to relating to authority, we must first value wisdom, and use it, but thirdly, we must...

III. Realize that it's not easy! (6–9)

After the instructions here, a person could think, “I got this: obey, don’t be rash, don’t join in evil causes, and do things in the right time and way—that’s easy.”

But Solomon wants to remind us that this isn’t easy, and that’s *why* you need wisdom. [pause]

Look there at verses 6–9, as I READ them. [READ]

Sometimes we think that the problems we face will all have easy, straightforward answers, but many of life’s situations are complex. [pauseee]

This is how it is with parenting...

Before people have kids, they act like they are an expert on parenting, and think that they have all the answers.

But once a person has children, they are like, “Why is nothing working?!” [pause]

You meet situations where you have no idea what to do, and you are at a loss. [pause]

Your child is still disobeying even though you have disciplined them all day long. [pause]

Your child wants to go and do this, and it feels like sort of a grey area, for it’s not something obviously sinful, yet you wonder if it would be wise to do. [pauseeee]

Likewise, when you start a new job, you think that you’ll have the answers to any of the problems that you’ll face.

But as time goes on, you are met with issues that you never fathomed, and which seem to have NO easy answer.

You are left scratching your head. [pauseeee]

Solomon is realistic, he wants us to remember that using wisdom isn’t always easy—relating to authority definitely isn’t! [pause]

He says in verse 6, “For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him.” [pause]

So he’s saying that there *is* a right time and way to do something—isn’t that encouraging to know?

Even in the most difficult, complex situations there is a right path forward! *[pauseeee]*

Now the path may not be easy to walk, nor clear right away to you, but there is a right time and way. *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes we believe that there's no right answer, but God is showing us that there is.

It may not look perfect, nor seem ideal, but it is the best thing to do in light of the circumstance. *[pauseeee]*

The reason why this isn't easy is because trouble lies heavy on us...

We face hardships, limitations, and the general difficulty of living in a fallen world. *[pause]*

Some of the trouble (or distress) we face is explained in verses 7–8, and it's that we don't know the future, nor do we control when we die. *[pause]*

This makes knowing the right time and way hard. *[pauseee]*

The truth is that if we knew the future, or if we knew when we would die, it would make choosing the right time and way much, much easier—but we are *limited*. *[pause]*

Every single one of our plans and decisions are actually tentative until they happen because we don't know nor control the future. *[pauseeee]*

Since I don't know what will happen tomorrow, it makes choosing the correct time and way to do something heavily distressing today. *[pauseee]*

When should you have kids? When should you retire? *[pause]*

Should you take that new job? Should you invest your money here or there and when?

Each of those are hard questions because we don't know the future nor control it. *[pauseeee]*

We get distressed because we worry that we'll make the wrong choice, or we wonder if we are missing a key piece of information.

And Solomon says, “Yep, that's exactly why this isn't easy, and why you need God's wisdom.” *[pauseeee]*

This means that we must depend on God with every plan and decision.

Since we don't know nor control the future, then we must trust *His* timing and ways. *[pauseeee]*

Some of you are agonizing over a decision or plan, and you need a passage like this...

It reminds us that we shouldn't let distress cause us to act rashly, nor give up in despair, but ask God for wisdom, act in faith, and trust Him with the results. *[pauseeee]*

This is especially important for when you relate to those in authority...

You won't always know how and when to approach a person in authority with something, for you don't know how they will respond or what the result will be.

So you need wisdom to choose the best time and way, and then depend on God with the outcome. *[pauseee]*

Reason #2 for why using wisdom is not easy when relating to authority is because authority is often misused. *[pause]*

In verse 9, he talks about how he observed all of this, "when man had power over man to his hurt." *[pauseee]*

The truth is that authority is regularly abused, as those in power can harm those under their care. *[pause]*

This is the way things are in this fallen world, and it can make life troublesome.

And this is why relating to authority can be extra hard, for we are dealing with *sinful* authorities. *[pauseee]*

You may wonder, "How do I relate to a government that can be so anti-God?"

Or, "How am I supposed to handle my boss, who is so mean and domineering?" *[pauseee]*

Or maybe as a child you may say, "My parents aren't always very nice in how they treat me, so how should I engage with them?" *[pause]*

Those are *exactly* the reasons why we need wisdom! *[pauseee]*

Sin, abuse, and corruption all throw complexity into the mix of our relationships, and this makes relating to others hard. *[pause]*

We don't know the future, nor control the future, and we are dealing with imperfect, sometimes corrupt leaders.

And this is why we need the humility to say, "Lord, I need you. I need your wisdom! Please give me more wisdom because this is hard!" *[pauseee]*

So earnestly seek the Lord to determine what to do and when, and then step out in faith, trusting God with whatever happens. *[pauseeee]*

This passage is reminding us that...

Wisdom is essential in relating to those in authority over you.

How are we to relate to those in authority over us?...

We must first value wisdom, seeing how important it is. *[pause]*

Wisdom can transform us to be gracious, pleasant, and peaceful people—do you remember how remarkable that wisdom is?! *[pauseeee]*

We can't stop there, though, for we must actually *use* wisdom as we relate to those over us.

We can't be all talk when it comes to wisdom, but we must be people of wisdom, who use it as we engage with others. *[pauseeee]*

Is wisdom displayed in your words and actions, or do you rashly act or maybe do you hesitate too long in worry? *[pauseee]*

Keep in mind though that this is not always going to be easy.

Since we don't know the future, don't control our lives, and live under sinful authorities, it makes relating to authority hard.

So we are led to humbly ask God for more wisdom, and trust Him with what happens. *[pause]*

Our circumstances, our relationships, our positions, our futures, and our lives are all in His hands. *[pauseeeee]*

While we may serve flawed and sinful authorities here on earth, we have a perfect, righteous, and good ultimate authority in Heaven: the Lord. *[pause]*

He doesn't use His authority to harm us, but He has used his authority to save us in grace through Jesus Christ. *[pause]*

In His infinite wisdom, He sent Christ to save us from our sins, so that all who believe in Him could be forgiven and given eternal life.

Have you trusted in Christ alone to save you from your sins? *[pauseeee]*

We, who have experienced the grace and wisdom of God's good authority in Christ, are to cling to His wisdom for life.

So cling to Christ, the wisdom of God,⁸ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”⁹ *[pause]*

He has all that you need, so go to Him everyday, trusting Him with the outcome.

⁸ A reference to 1 Corinthians 1:24.

⁹ Colossians 2:3.