

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD

Respecting Authority

“My son, fear the LORD and the king; do not associate with those who are given to change, for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin *that comes* from both of them?”
~ Proverbs 24:21-22

A Crisis of Authority

The Black Lives Matter protests and Antifa riots of 2020, the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, the explosive growth of the influence of the Transgender movement, and the rapid popularization of socialism have vividly exposed the crisis of authority that exists in American culture. Today, in some parts of the country one is more apt to see graffiti of a raised fist than the display of an American flag.

This is no surprise. This anti-authority sentiment has been simmering for decades. Writing in 2009, Kenneth Wingate (*A Father's Gift: Lessons from Proverbs*, 131) observed the following:

Americans have grown noticeably hostile toward authority figures in the last fifty years. Since the 1950s, when members of the so-called ‘greatest generation’ were running the country and raising their families, rejection of the establishment has taken on epic proportions. Presidents, parents, and pastors were once respected, even if disliked. No longer.

The rallying cry of the 1960s was ‘Question Authority.’ The self-absorbed ‘Me’ generation of the ’70s led to the self-indulgent ‘Material’ generation of the ’80s and ’90s. The weakening of our social institutions has been profound. In the common parlance, many young people today have serious ‘respect issues’ with parents, teachers, pastors, bosses and authority figures in general. How do we reverse the decline?

In reality, the challenge to authority is as old as sin itself. The solicitation of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden encouraged Adam and Eve to raise the fist for the first time and challenge the authority of their Creator. They fell, and ever since their descendants have been characterized by rebellion—against God and against any other form of authority derived from Him.

Consequently, the issue of authority is a significant theme in biblical wisdom and the book of Proverbs in particular. This becomes evident even by examining the history of the book’s composition and identifying its original audience and purpose. The book repeatedly attributes its contents and compilation to kings (Solomon, “king of Israel” – 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Hezekiah, “king of Judah” – 25:1; and “King Lemuel” – 31:1). Considering that Solomon aimed much of his instruction in wisdom to his son or sons, the book of Proverbs is in many ways a curriculum for young monarchs. It is only natural that it would deal frequently with the topic of authority. A survey of book yields at least **four basic principles for understanding and relating to authority.**

1. A proper attitude toward authority identifies God as the ultimate Sovereign.

The book of Proverbs makes clear that a proper understanding of authority begins with the recognition that God alone is sovereign. There is no other authority that supersedes His authority; there is no one who competes with His rule. In fact, there is no basis to understand or accept the concept of human authority apart from this fundamental appreciation for God’s sovereignty. The man who submits to this reality is the one who can navigate the path of life successfully.

- **3:5-7** – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.”
- **16:9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1-2, 30-31; 22:2; 29:26**

How does God exercise this ultimate authority? The wisdom of Proverbs teaches that He does so: (a) through His written law (verbal revelation); and (b) through the laws He instilled in creation (natural revelation).

- (a) That God mediates His authority through **verbal revelation** is evident in Proverbs' designation of this revelation as "the fear of the LORD." The use of "fear" in Proverbs must be understood not only as referring to man's *response to God*. The term is also used to describe God's own words in that they mediate His authority to such an extent that they *produce fear* (see "Fearing God," 9/9/2020). This use of the designation "the fear of the LORD" is evident in Psalm 19:7-9, where "fear" is used as a synonym to such terms as God's "law," "testimony," "precepts," "commandment," and "judgments."

Consequently, biblical wisdom teaches that embracing this "fear"—this *supremely authoritative revelation*—is the foundation for success in life: **1:7; 9:10; 15:33; 28:9; Job 28:28; Psalm 34:11; 111:10; 119:120; Isaiah 66:1-2.**

- (b) The book of Proverbs also teaches that God exercises His authority through **natural revelation** (see also Romans 1:20). The sayings of Proverbs frequently allude to this authority through the use of illustrations drawn from the natural world. These illustrations emphasize that creation mediates God's sovereignty. Like God's verbal revelation, natural (general) revelation also has its "laws" that man is to observe and learn from—such as *the law of sowing and reaping* (cause-and-effect); *the law of personal responsibility* (a man is always responsible for his moral actions); *the law of assimilation* (a man conforms to the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of those with whom he most closely associates); etc. To reject these "laws of nature" is the epitome of rebellion (for example, see Rom 1:18–20, 26–27, and Paul's condemnation of homosexuality as "contrary to nature;" and 1 Cor 11:14-15 and Paul's teaching regarding the distinction between the male and female as drawn from "nature").

Consider these examples of how the wise men of Proverbs drew wisdom from nature's laws: **6:6-11; 14:4; 27:18; 30:24-28.**

Ultimately, a biblical worldview is established upon the understanding that God is sovereign, and He mediates that sovereignty through His revealed laws—in Scripture and creation. To reject this reality removes the basis for understanding authority in general, inevitably leading a man to chaos and ruin.

2. A proper attitude toward authority acknowledges that God has delegated authority to certain individuals.

While God's authority is ultimate, He delegates some of His authority to His image-bearers for the realization of His purposes. But God does not delegate this authority among all equally—and this is a hard truth for many to accept. According to His own prerogative and good pleasure, He gives it to some but not others; He also gives it over some areas and not others. As Daniel 2:21 states, "It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings." In any given context there will be one who has authority and another who does not. This distinction is by divine design, and it is crucial for a man to acknowledge this reality if he is to navigate life successfully. Those in power are to exercise their duties of leadership. Those under these authorities are to respect and submit to such leaders. The spheres of authority Proverbs recognizes include:

- (a) **Parents.** The book of Proverbs depicts parents—and the father in particular—as the most basic and influential of human authorities. Proverbs defends the unique authority of parents and denounces anyone who would denigrate that authority. Parents are charged with the responsibility and the right to instruct, admonish, and even exercise corporal punishment. Children are called upon to respect their parents, obey their teaching, and appreciate their discipline. A child's submission to this most basic expression of authority is key to success in life: **1:8-9; 3:1-2; 4:1-4, 10, 20-22; 6:20-21; 8:32; 15:20; 17:2; 19:18, 26; 20:20; 23:13-14, 26; 28:24; 29:15; 30:11, 17.**

These proverbs reflect the truth expressed in the fifth commandment of the Mosaic Law—a truth also emphasized in the New Testament: **Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-3.**

- (b) **Kings.** The book of Proverbs also portrays the rule of civil magistrates—specifically kings—as an extension of God’s own sovereignty. According to the wisdom of Proverbs, the king—as the highest human authority in civic affairs—is to function as God’s vice-regent on earth to exercise justice, protect the innocent, reward the righteous, avenge the oppressed, and punish the evildoer. Once again, crucial to successful living in the world is the willingly submission to those who possess such authority: **14:35; 19:12; 20:2; 24:21-22.**

Certainly, these proverbs reflect the unique status of Israel as a *theocratic kingdom*, wherein the king ruled as a mediator between God and His people. But the command to respect and submit to civil magistrates, rulers, and kings extends beyond the theocratic status of ancient Israel. The New Testament applies these same requirements to Christians: **Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17.**

- (c) **Teachers.** The book of Proverbs also recognizes that God has delegated authority to those who teach His laws and statutes. These are those who have authority in the area of knowledge and wisdom—who shape and grow others by conveying and applying the revelation of God. If a man is to have success in this world, he must also respect and follow these men and their teaching: **11:14; 13:13, 14, 20; 22:17.**

The analogous sphere in the New Testament church is comprised of elders/overseers. As teachers (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9), they are to be respected for the authority delegated by God to them: **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7, 17.**

- (d) **Masters.** A fourth sphere of delegated authority recognized by the book of Proverbs pertains to labor. Proverbs calls upon men in positions of labor to submit to those for whom they labor: **25:13; 27:18.**

Once again, this command is not limited to the unique status of ancient, theocratic Israel. The same principle of respect and submission is taught in the New Testament church: **Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9-10.**

The validity of these categories of delegated authority is demonstrated in their right *to exercise punishment*. Proverbs affirms the application of verbal and physical punishment to those who rebel: **13:24; 19:18, 29; 20:8, 26; 21:15; 22:15; 23:13-14; 26:3; 29:15.** The actions of admonition, discipline, and punishment are affirmed by Proverbs as necessary expressions of authority in a sin-filled world.

3. A proper attitude toward authority affirms that those with authority must exercise it in a way consistent with God’s will.
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Since all human authority is derived from God, every human authority is accountable to Him. Such authority can function correctly only when it is exercised in the manner God intended. Therefore, Proverbs not only instructs those *under* authority respect and submit to that authority, but it also instructs those *with* authority to exercise it with righteousness and justice.

Even the king of ancient Israel—the most powerful man among the people—remained under the Law of God and subject to its rule (see Deuteronomy 17:18-20; 1 Kings 2:1-4). This recognition of God’s authority over human kings as mediated by His revelation gave rise to the motto, *Lex Rex* (Latin for “the Law is King”), rather than *Rex Lex* (“the King is Law”). This saying emphasizes that no earthly king is a law unto himself; he is always accountable to a higher law—the law of God.

- **20:28** – “Loyalty and truth preserve the king, and he upholds his throne by righteousness.”
- **8:15-16; 16:10, 12; 17:7, 15; 24:23b-25; 25:4-5; 28:2, 12, 15-16; 29:2, 4, 12, 14; 31:3-5, 8-9.**

On the one hand, the authority God delegates to leaders can be a great blessing to those under their leadership. This is what Solomon implies when he likened the decisions of a king to “channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes” (21:1). Water in the land of ancient Israel was a precious commodity and was frequently used as a metaphor for blessing (Waltke, *Proverbs 15-31*, 168). As God’s vice-regent, a leader’s decisions can be the medium through which flow God’s good gifts.

On the other hand, the proverbs noted above remind us that human authority can easily be corrupted because of the sinfulness of men’s hearts. Proverbs is realistic about life outside of the innocence of the Garden of Eden. In such cases this leadership can become a curse on those under the leader’s authority.

4. A proper attitude toward authority demands submission to those in positions of authority.

The book of Proverbs emphasizes that those *under* authority have a duty to respect and submit to those *in* authority. This is a fundamental key to successful living in a treacherous world. The God-fearing man will intentionally seek to live in good favor with those in authority over him and will acknowledge his own place through willful compliance: **14:35; 16:14-15; 17:11; 19:12; 20:2; 23:13-14; 26; 27:18; Exodus 22:28; Ecclesiastes 10:20.**

Proverbs makes it clear that to fear God necessitates fearing the king He has placed on the throne. According to biblical wisdom, one cannot simultaneously disrespect the king and fear God: **24:21-22.** In turn, humble submissiveness to those in authority provide opportunities for positive influence: **16:13; 22:11; 25:13; 25:15.** The importance of respect for those in positions of authority even leads the wise men of Proverbs to emphasize the need for proper manners in the presence of leaders: **23:1-3; 25:6-7.**

The New Testament continues this theme of respect for legitimate authorities: **Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1-2; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 2:13-17.**

Of course, there are distinctions and limits to each kind of authority God has created based upon its intended purpose. Civil government (the “king”) must not interfere with the God-given authority of parents over their own children, nor parents with the God-given authority of the state. Israel’s king was not to usurp the role of the priest (compare Numbers 3:10 and 18:7 with 2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Jesus summarized it simply: **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s”** (Matt 22:21; Mark 12:16; 20:24). When one sphere oversteps its divinely-revealed limits, then those under the authority of such disobedient authorities must carefully follow the example of Daniel (Daniel 6:10) and Peter (Acts 5:29).

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- Do you have the testimony of one who is submissive to leadership, or have you been frequently admonished for disrespect or insubordination? If so, what needs to change?
- In which areas of authority—or to which authorities—has it been most difficult for you to submit?
- The four main spheres of authority for the Christian today are: (a) the state; (b) the family; (c) the workplace; and (d) the church. List at least one new practical step you can take in each of these spheres to honor those whom God has placed over you.
- What does a believer’s disrespect for human authorities say about his view of God’s sovereignty?
- If the president and vice-president of the United States walked into your presence today, how would you display honor to them? In light of the teaching of Proverbs, how should you show honor to them when you are *not* in their presence?
- What are the principles you would use to justify *not* obeying an authority?

This Week’s Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw ***Next Meeting:*** Mar 17 – “Raising Children, Pt. 1”