



Lesson Guide

Lesson 9 - The State: Whose Law?

Introduction

In the southwest quadrant of our compass lie the spheres of the state, politics, and law. On this, the ninth of twelve worldview tours to be completed during the course of *The Truth Project*, we will take a close and careful look at how these spheres are interconnected and how they relate to other aspects of the social realm: family, church, labor, community, and the relationship between God and man. Special attention will be given to the design, structure, and role of the *state*, its place in God's plan for human society, and the rightful extent and limits of its power. The state, as we will see, has the capacity to exert a tremendous power for good in the affairs of mankind as long as it operates within its proper boundaries; but it also has the potential to become the most horrendously pathological and abusive of all the social spheres if not kept in check.

Themes

Significantly, Dr. Tackett begins this tour with a look at older ideas about the relationship between the state and the *ethical* realm. According to Webster's 1828 Dictionary, law, politics, and the state are, among other things, concerned with the preservation and improvement of a people's *morals*. Though few today would be inclined to accept this definition, a moment's reflection is sufficient to demonstrate how important it really is. For as Dr. Tackett illustrates by considering a very simple question – "Can the state steal?" – human governments *are* capable of error and transgression and *must* be held accountable to a higher ethical law if they are to be prevented from wreaking havoc in the lives of the citizens entrusted to their oversight and care.

God's perspective on the state, as we will discover through a careful examination of the relevant scriptural passages, is that it is strictly subordinate to *His* sovereign dominion and control. Just as the Son is subject to the Father, the wife to the husband, and the elders of the church to the headship of Christ, so the authority of the state, within the economy of the divine design for the political sphere, is subject to and dependent upon the authority of God Himself. Governors and magistrates hold their power purely as delegates and representatives of the King of all kings. They are appointed and armed with the sword in order that they might 1) punish evil and 2) condone good. Those who forget these principles and become puffed up with a sense of their own importance are, like Ahab (1 Kings 21), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:20-30), Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26), and Herod (Acts 12:21-23), liable to swift and severe judgment.

This last point is worthy of special attention; for, as the Bible and history demonstrate, when human rulers overstep their bounds, deny the sovereignty of the various social spheres, and seek

to establish state control over every other area of human life, tyranny, oppression, and violence are sure to follow. The godless expansion of the power of the state has reared its ugly head many times in the past, most notably in the 20th century regimes of rulers like Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot. It is raising its head again in our own time, says Dr. Tackett. Without God, truth, or any higher moral standard, people are increasingly looking to the state as savior and the supplier of every human need. In the face of this trend, Bible-believing Christians must have the courage to resist what Dr. Tackett calls “The Rise of the State” – to stand firm, draw a line in the sand, and say, “This far and no more.”

Points to Watch For

Dr. Tackett warns students at the outset of this tour that some may find themselves “conflicted” as they contemplate the implications of his message. This is because, as a result of the raging of the *Cosmic Battle*, many people in our day have been *taken captive* by the lie that the state, and not God, is to “go before us” as our savior and sustainer and the source of all good things. This discussion is calculated from beginning to end to expose and challenge this assumption. There are obvious implications here for the debate between proponents of “liberal” and “conservative” social policy (i.e., the “welfare state” and its opponents).

Discussion Questions (Pick 3 or 4 for your discussion time.)

(Make these questions your own. That is, don’t just “read” them, but become familiar with them so that they don’t appear as simply an item to get through. Go through them yourself before your group meets and ponder them.)

1) Opening Question: (this may be the only question you need to ask).

A. Ask your guests to list what they saw on the tour. Here are some of the key items: The question of whether or not the state can ever be guilty of stealing; Naboth's vineyard; Nebuchadnezzar; the sovereignty of God over kings; the design of the sphere of the state; the king subject to God; why Israel asked for a king; God's warning of what the king would do; sphere sovereignty and Uzziah; cowboy movies; Romans 13 and the purpose of the state to punish evil and condone good; the delegation of authority and how it was found already within the Godhead; why we have uniforms and take oaths of office; the millions that have been put to death by this sphere; the rise of the state and the rise of the global state; Israel rejecting God and wanting the king to "go before them".

B. Ask your guests to point out the ones that were particularly interesting or striking to them and why.

C. Ask if this particular area struck anyone else as well.

D. Ask if there were other items that they saw that stood out to them. (You may want to read back through the list if you need to.)

- 2) **At the beginning of the discussion, Dr. Tackett establishes the point that the state, like an individual private citizen, is capable of stealing, murdering, and committing crimes. Why is this concept so important? What are its deeper implications for the nature and design of the state?**

(The basic principle to highlight here is the existence of a supreme, overarching *ethical* standard to which the state, like everybody else, is ultimately accountable. This standard in turn implies the existence of God, without whom we have no basis for morals, and who has intentionally placed Himself at the pinnacle of the socio-political design for human life.)

- 3) **What is law? Where does it come from? How is it supposed to function?**

(Law is *not* an arbitrary concept. To use the Platonic language we picked up in Lesson 2, the *particulars* of any given nation's laws are supposed to reflect the *universal* ethical standard that has its roots in the nature and character of God. This means that human beings, including government authorities, are not free to "invent" laws on the basis of their own preferences. It also implies that the law of the state cannot be regarded as *absolute* – we must constantly re-evaluate it with reference to eternal truth and change it if it does not measure up to the higher ethical standard.)

- 4) **What did Abraham Kuyper mean by the term "sphere sovereignty?" How does the story of King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26) illustrate the importance of this concept? Why is it so vital to our understanding of the role of the state today?**

(The important point here is that the state, within the economy of God's design, does *not* have the right to usurp the authority of the other social spheres – family, church, labor, God and man – in terms of their own specific purposes. For example, the government has no rightful jurisdiction over the church sphere. King Uzziah violated this principle when he entered the Temple and attempted to burn incense on the altar. It is crucial that we grasp this concept today, for we live in a time when the so-called "death of God" has blurred the lines between the spheres and opened the way for the state to arrogate to itself a kind of "divine" authority over all aspects of life. The unchecked path of this position is what we call "totalitarianism," a form of government that has been responsible for more death, destruction, and misery than any other in the history of the world.)

- 5) **God permitted Israel to establish a monarchy, but warned the people that they would later regret it. Why did God say that they had rejected *Him* from being their king? How else might they have dealt with the problem of Samuel's corrupt sons?**

(There is a great deal of food for thought here. In some ways, a discussion of this subject could provide an introduction to the topic of Lesson 10, "The American Experiment." Recognizing the evil inherent in human nature, the people *should* have been wary of placing too much power in the hands of any one man. By looking to a king to "go out before them," they were in effect handing over a huge portion of the sovereignty of other social spheres to the governing authority and expecting it to function as their "savior." In this way, they were aiding and abetting the "rise of the state" as a rival to God. As an alternative, they *could* have asked Samuel to discipline his sons or replace them with godly judges – a privilege and responsibility that resides within the hands of the people in a form of government in which the leaders are elected..)

- 6) **Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). What connection do you see between this passage and the situation described in 1 Samuel 8?**

(It is rarely mentioned that Jesus’ words have clear implications for the concept of “sphere sovereignty.” Christ indicates that there are *limits* to the power and authority of the state: some things are rightly Caesar’s, but others belong to God alone. In claiming the “best of your fields and vineyards ... a tenth of your grain and your vintage ... and a tenth of your sheep” [1 Samuel 8:14-17], Israel’s future king will in effect be *setting himself up in the place of God*. When Jesus said “Render unto Caesar ...,” He was *not* giving the Pharisees a straight answer to their question. Instead, in typical Jesus fashion, He was throwing the question back at His interrogators: “How do *you* see the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the authority of the ruler? What do *you* think is appropriate in this situation? How will *you* order your life and behavior accordingly?)