

LEAD A RIGHTEOUS LIFE, AS DEFINED BY THE WORD OF GOD

Introduction

If you go to Lexington, Massachusetts, you can stand on the very site where was fired “the shot heard ‘round the world”—the village square where was fought the initial skirmish that began the American Revolutionary War. A guide will give you a tour of the site, pointing out where the colonists took up their defensive positions, ... the road from where the British troops entered the town, ... the significant houses and landmarks.

Having made your way around the village commons, the tour ends at one corner of the square where there has been erected a little stone monument: it is a stone replica of a pulpit, marking the site where once stood the village church. On the stone pulpit there is carved a replica of the Bible, but rather than lying open, it is positioned as closed and face down.

Whatever the original intent of the sculptor, the message conveyed is that the Bible is no longer consulted as the divine guidebook for righteous living. It is a book that has been read and now belongs to the past, consigned to a long ago age of history. When that happens, the divine definition of righteous living tends to be replaced by human abstractions and perversions of the divine standard. If left unchecked and not corrected, that trend can lead to such bizarre and contradictory situations as those described in Isaiah 65:2,5

...All day long I have held out my hands to a rebellious people, [a people] who walk in a way that is not good, following their own thoughts ... ⁵[They are a people] who say, Stay away, do not come near me, for I am holier than you! These people are like smoke in my nostrils, produced by a fire that burns all day long. (Isa. 65:2,5)

Two Christian researchers, having concluded a study on the American church, wrote in 1984,

Research has indicated that millions of Christians fail to comprehend the connection between God’s teaching through the Bible, ... and their own daily activities. ...This ineptness is the result of the biblical illiteracy of Christians and their inability to apply scriptural principles to their daily lives. Spiritual values are commonly thought to be operative only on Sundays, leaving the average Christian unarmed in his daily struggles in the marketplace. (*Vital Signs*, George Barna and William Paul McKay, Crossway Books, Westchester IL, 1984, p.24)

If you are truly going to lead a righteous life that is pleasing to God—a life that receives His blessing and is itself a blessing—it needs to be the kind of life He defines as being righteous in His Word.

**I. Lead a Righteous Life, by Being a Man of Integrity
(Proverbs 20:7; Proverbs 11:3; Proverbs 29:18; Proverbs 25:26)**

A righteous man walks in his integrity—blessed are his children who follow him. (Prov. 20:7)

A righteous man is described as a man who “*walks in his integrity.*” By definition, integrity means the adherence and compliance and commitment to a moral standard; the only true moral standard is that provided by the LORD our God and as especially revealed in the Scriptures.

Proverbs 11:3 informs us, “*The integrity of the upright shall guide them, but the perverseness of the unfaithful will destroy them.*” That is to say, the commitment of the upright to the commandments of God serves as his moral compass, directing his behavior, determining his decisions, defining his lifestyle. The upright man asks such questions as, Is this particular action or decision or course that I am contemplating right, is it in accord with the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures and especially as made known in His commandments? Or, will this particular action or decision or course that I am contemplating cause me to transgress against the commandments of God and betray my commitment to Christ?

Faithfulness to our integrity may be tested. It may be tested by means of trials permitted and conducted by God, as was the case with Job:

Then Jehovah said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and turns away from evil. He still maintains his integrity—even though you moved me to take action against him to ruin him without just cause.” (Job 2:3)

It may be tested by means of by temptations introduced by men designed to draw us away from our integrity, as Job encountered from his own wife: “*[Job’s] wife said to him, ‘Are you still maintaining your integrity? Renounce God and die!’*” (Job 2:9.)

Like Job, we must value our integrity as our most treasured possession: “*until I die, I will not renounce my integrity. I firmly hold on to my righteousness and will not let it go; my conscience does not reproach me for any of my days*” (Job 27:5b-6.) Like the Psalmist, we must look to God, praying that He will uphold us in our integrity: “*as for me, you uphold me in my integrity*” (Psl. 41:12.)

Where there is no vision, the people throw off restraint; but he who keeps the law, blessed is he. (Prov. 29:18)

Proverbs 29:18a informs us that it is a moral vision that inspires a people to live within the law and to practice the sacrifice of self-discipline. By way of

illustration: It is his future orientation and focus on the prospect of winning the championship that inspires the athlete to endure present discipline, sacrifice and training. Likewise, it is the moral vision of bequeathing to the next generation a society characterized by true and godly freedom—a society conducive to the spread of the gospel and the peace of the church—that inspires a people to self-sacrifice and self-discipline. But when that moral vision is gone, *"the people throw off restraint."* When they lose sight of building for tomorrow, they start living for today, ... living for the present, ... living for themselves. Self-discipline gives way to lawlessness; self-sacrifice gives way to self-indulgence.

Proverbs 29:18b is describing an individual man who continues to maintain his integrity when all those around him have lost their moral vision—the blessing of God is pronounced upon him.

Lead a righteous life by being a man of integrity, even when all those around you have cast off their moral restraints and have lost their moral vision. May we ever heed the exhortation of the writer of Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²Let us focus our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand on the throne of God. (Heb.12:1-2)

Like a muddied spring or a polluted well, so is a righteous man who yields to the wicked. (Prov. 25:26)

Especially in an arid land, to come across a muddied spring (one that has been trampled by a herd of cattle) or to discover that a well is polluted, was more than a great disappointment, it could be a tragedy. Such a situation is used to illustrate the affects and consequences of a righteous man yielding his integrity before the wicked. Being either intimidated by their threats or seduced by their winsomeness and their favors, a good man sacrifices his integrity and gives in to the demands of the wicked. The consequence is one of great disappointment and maybe even tragedy: evil is abetted instead of being challenged, and a role model is tarnished, maybe even destroyed.

Consider some of the examples found in Scripture. As a negative example, consider the community leaders who yielded to the demands of wicked queen Jezebel:

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. ⁹In those letters she wrote: Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. ¹⁰But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that

he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death. ¹¹So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. (1 Kgs. 21:8-11)

As a positive example, consider that of Lot withstanding the perverse men of Sodom:

But before they lay down to sleep, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. ⁵They called to Lot and said to him, Where are the men who came into your house tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may have sex with them. ⁶Lot went outside to meet with them and shut the door behind him. ⁷He said to them, "I beg you, my brothers, do not do such a wicked thing." (Gen. 19:4-7)

Lead a righteous life by being a man of integrity even when it is hard. By the grace of God, let us withstand both the threats and the seductions to step aside and allow wrong doing to pass by unchallenged, and so to become an unwitting accomplice to evil rather than its adversary.

II. Lead a Righteous Life, by Being a Man of Honesty (Proverbs 13:5; Proverbs 12:5; Proverbs 21:15)

***A righteous man hates lying; but a wicked man is loathsome and will be put to shame.** (Prov. 13:5)*

Note that the righteous man does not only abstain from the practice of deceit, but he also has a moral revulsion to it: he hates it. He recognizes deceit to be the lifestyle and the practice of the devil, consider the testimony of the Lord Jesus concerning the character of the devil:

He was a murderer from the beginning and is not established in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he is speaking in accordance with his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies. (Jn. 8:44b)

With regard to lying and resorting to deceit, a righteous man holds the same view as does the LORD God Himself: he hates it, considering it as contemptible and detestable, note Proverbs 12:22a, "*Lying lips are detestable to Jehovah.*"

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the perfectly righteous man, indicated by His conduct at the time of His trial that it is better to die than to lie—such is His commitment to and respect for the truth and His revulsion against deceit.

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right

hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt. 26:63-64;) the Lord Jesus testified to the truth, even though He knew that by doing so the Jews would accuse Him of blasphemy, (a crime punishable by death;) which very thing they promptly proceeded to do: *Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶What do you think?” “He is worthy of death,” they answered.* (Matt. 26:65-66)

A righteous man comes to understand that truth is sacred (because it originates from God and is part of His moral character,) and that deceit is either a malicious assault against that which is holy or a self-seeking sacrifice of what is holy.

The thoughts of the righteous are just, but the wicked advise deceit. (Prov. 12:5)

A wicked man will either counsel you to do what is deceitful, or will be deceitful with you when he offers you counsel. Because his heart is not united to the truth of God and his life is not controlled by that divine truth, he operates in the evil shadows of deceit.

But such counsel and such conduct are unthinkable to the righteous man: his thoughts are just. Both the desire of his heart and the direction of his mind, being in communion with God, are for truth and justice. The righteous man takes to heart and seeks to abide by the divine exhortation given through the prophet Zechariah: *These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and execute the judgment of truth and peace in your courts; ¹⁷do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this, declares Jehovah.* (Zech. 8:16-17.)

It is a joy to the righteous to do justice; but justice is destruction for the workers of iniquity. (Prov. 21:15)

The righteous man does not find justice and righteousness to be a duty that is contrary to his renewed nature; rather, he finds them to be a delight to his heart and a satisfaction to his soul. Being united to Christ, he possesses the heart and mind of Christ, of whom Scripture testifies: *“You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity”* (Heb. 1:9.) *“I delight to do your will, O my God; indeed, your law is within my heart,”* such is the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ prophetically proclaimed through the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 40:8.

As a child of God, the righteous man has an affinity and oneness with the truth and righteousness of God and thus finds it to be a joy to participate in that righteousness and see it prevail and prosper.

Note the language of these proverbs: a righteous man **hates** lying (13:5); **the thoughts** of the righteous are just (12:5); it is **a joy** to the righteous to do justice

(21:15.) This is not merely a description of conduct, it is a description of character—the character of Christ, the character that is being reproduced in the Christian’s life, note Colossians 3:9-10, *"Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator"* (Col. 3:9-10.) May the Holy Spirit help us to live more in accordance with the new life we have in Christ, indeed, the sharing in the very life of Christ Himself.

III. Lead a Righteous Life, by Being a Man of Compassion (Proverbs 21:21; Proverbs 12:10; Proverbs 29:7)

He who follows after righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness, and honor. (Prov. 21:21)

Note that the Scriptures couple together the attributes of righteousness (including justice, truth, integrity) and kindness (including compassion, mercy, sympathy):

Do not let kindness and integrity forsake you, tie them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. (Prov. 3:3)

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matt. 23:23)

He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does Jehovah require of you? He requires that you act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:8)

Justice and mercy are the twin attributes that together compose the righteous life. Our Lord Jesus Christ who is the epitome of holiness is at the same time the epitome of compassion.

A righteous man has concern for the well-being of his beast; but even the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. (Prov. 12:10)

Proverbs 12:10a literally reads, *"a righteous man knows (עָדַן) the life (or, the feelings) of his beast."* Here is a tenderheartedness and compassion that extends even to the life of one’s animals, a tenderheartedness that originates from God and is embedded in His commandments:

*Remember the Sabbath day; remember to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work; ¹⁰but **the seventh day is a Sabbath dedicated to Jehovah your God. On that day you shall not do any work, neither you, nor***

your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor the sojourner who is staying within your gates. (Ex. 20:8-10)

In contrast to the compassion shown by the righteous, "*the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.*" An ungodly man is devoid of any true sense of pity, mercy, compassion; those attributes are foreign to his heart, contrary to his fundamental nature.

The righteous takes into account the cause of the poor; the wicked does not have the understanding to know it. (Prov. 29:7)

Literally, "*a righteous man knows* (יָדַע) *the cause of the poor* (or the weak, the lowly;) there is a compassionate and active involvement in the cause of the poor. Note Job's testimony concerning his compassionate conduct toward the poor and the helpless:

I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had no one to assist him. ¹³The man who was destitute blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing for joy. ¹⁴I put on righteousness as my clothing, and the justice I practiced was like a robe and a turban. ¹⁵I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. ¹⁶I was a father to the needy; I investigated the stranger's case. ¹⁷I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. (Job 29:12-17)

Conversely, the wicked does not possess the understanding to know the cause of the poor. The wicked man lacks the moral perception and sensitivity to feel such compassion and exhibit such concern; because of his hard heart, the wicked man cannot sympathize and identify with the plight of the poor.

Conclusion

If we are going to lead a truly righteous life that is pleasing to God—a life that receives His blessing and is itself a blessing—it needs to be the kind of life He Himself defines and describes in His Word. The Book of Proverbs indicates that such a life involves these three elements: 1) being a man of integrity; 2) being a man of honesty; and 3) being a man of compassion.