

FULFILL YOUR CHRISTIAN OBLIGATION TO SOCIETY

Introduction

Would you vote for a mule? Back in 1938 the people of Wilton, WA, did.

The name "Boston Curtis" appeared on the ballot for Republican committeeman for the town of Wilton. The town's mayor sponsored the candidacy of Boston Curtis and consequently, Boston Curtis won the election. But to everyone's surprise and consternation, Boston Curtis turned out to be a mule!

The mayor was behind it all. He conceived the idea of sponsoring a mule to prove his point that most of the citizens of Wilton paid little regard to the candidates or the issues in the local election. Consequently, the careless, preoccupied voters of Wilton ended up with a mule as their newly elected committeeman. (*Our Daily Bread*, 11/3/92)

Looking on the bright side of things, it could have been worse! A mule may be an improvement over some of the candidates who run for public office. It's better to take a mule any day over a fox or a snake! But the mayor had a point: he proved that many of the local citizens had little concern for their civic responsibility. Bearing this in mind, let us now turn to our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs: Our Christian obligation to society.

I. Fulfill Your Christian Obligation to Society, by Taking Seriously the Promise and Warning of Scripture (Proverbs 14:34)

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people. (Prov. 14:34)

The proverb is true and must be taken seriously because of the character of God: *"Jehovah is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face"* (Psl. 11:7.) Note, also, Psalm 7:11, *"God is a righteous judge, a God who has indignation every day."*

In what ways does righteousness exalt a nation? First, righteousness exalts a nation by bringing it honor:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as Jehovah my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Deut. 4:5-6)

Second, righteousness exalts a nation by bringing it blessing:

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commandments, ⁴I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. ⁵Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. (Lev. 26:3-5)

Third, righteousness exalts a nation by bringing it peace:

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commandments, ...⁶I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from your land, and the sword will not pass through your country. (Lev. 26:3,6)

Fourth, righteousness exalts a nation by bringing it strength:

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commandments, ...⁷You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. ⁸Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you. (Lev. 26:3,7-8)

But Proverbs 14:34b goes on to say, “*sin is a disgrace to any people.*” The nation that violates and rejects the Creator’s holy law becomes subject to His holy judgment. Consider the example of Sodom and Gomorrah:

And Jehovah said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and because their sin is very grievous; ²¹I will now go down and investigate whether they have done all that the protest that has been brought before me charges; and if not, I will know.” (Gen. 18:20-21)

Then Jehovah rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire—from Jehovah out of heaven. ²⁵So he overthrew those cities—and all the Plain—and all the inhabitants of those cities, and all the vegetation of the land. (Gen. 19:24-25)

Where do we find the definition of righteousness and sin? How do men learn the definition of these moral categories? The definition of righteousness and sin is to be found in the law of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures and as it is written upon every human heart: *Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the [written] Law, do by nature things required by the Law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the [written] Law, ¹⁵since they show that the requirements of the Law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. (Rom. 2:14-15a)* Speaking of mankind in general, the Apostle Paul informs us, “*they know God’s righteous decrees*” (Rom. 1:32.) By way of example: In April 1992, Los Angeles exploded in

rioting and rampant acts of violence. One unforgettable scene on TV involved a black storeowner. With the boldness of a prophet, he shouted at the looters, "What you are doing just isn't right! It isn't right!" His words stirred the consciences of young and old alike ... We bear God's image. That's why we often feel an inner revulsion when we see or do what isn't right. God's nature has been offended. A divine law has been broken, and a penalty is required. In that man's shout, "It just isn't right!" we hear the echo of God's voice within our own nature. (*Our Daily Bread*, 3/27/93)

We begin to fulfill our Christian obligation to society by recognizing and taking seriously the moral accountability of nations and societies before God.

II. Fulfill Your Christian Obligation to Society, by Leading a Righteous Life (Proverbs 28:4; Proverbs 24:21-22)

Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law contend against them. (Prov. 28:4)

"Those who forsake the law praise the wicked." That is to say, those who reject the law of God turn their back on the divine and absolute standard of right and wrong. Having done so, they inevitably end up "praising the wicked" by accepting their immoral and man-centered lifestyle as a viable and legitimate alternative. Proverbs 28:4b goes on to say, *"but those who keep the law contend against them."* By honoring the law of God and adhering to it, we are bearing witness to the divine standard and bearing witness against those who ignore or willfully violate that standard. Consider Lot's conduct and witness as described in Genesis 19:5-7,9,

They 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." ...⁹But they said, "Stand back.' Then they said, "This fellow came to our city as a sojourner, and he would make himself a judge. Now we will deal worse with you than with them." They kept bringing pressure against Lot and moved forward to break down the door. (Gen. 19:5-7,9)

It is urgent that we take to heart the word of Proverbs 28:4 and live accordingly. Hear the words of Charles Colson, writing about Western civilization, and in particular, American society, at the end of the twentieth century:

We live in a society in which all transcendent values have been removed and thus there is no moral standard by which anyone can say right is right and wrong is wrong. What we live in is, in the memorable image of Richard Neuhaus, a naked public square.

On the surface, a value-free society sounds liberal, progressive, and enlightened ... But when the public square is naked, truth and values drift with the winds of public favor and there is nothing objective to govern how we are to live together. Why should we be shocked, then, by the inevitable consequences; why should we be surprised to discover that society yields what is planted?

... As C.S. Lewis wrote forty years ago, “We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst.”

... Without objective values, the community or one’s neighbor has no superior claim over one’s own desires.

Whether we like to hear it or not, we are reaping the consequences of the decades since World War II when we have, in Solzhenitsyn’s words, “forgotten God.” What we have left is the reign of relativism ... humanity cannot survive without some form of law. “The truly naked public square is at best a transitional phenomenon,” wrote Richard John Neuhaus. “It is a vacuum begging to be filled.” Excise belief in God and you are left with only two principals: the individual and the state ... “The naked public square cannot remain naked, the direction is toward the state-as-church, toward totalitarianism.”

... this has already occurred in Marxist nations where the death of God has created a new form of messiah—the all-powerful state whose political ideology acquires the force of religion. The same is true, though not as extreme, in the West where traditional religious influences have been excluded from public debates ... As a result, government is free to make its own ultimate judgments. Hence government ideology acquires the force of religion.

... With no ultimate reference point supporting it—no just cause for obedience—law can only be enforced by the bayonet. So the state seeks more and more coercive power.

... In these last twenty years of the twentieth century, we are sailing uncharted waters. Never before in the history of Western civilization has the public square been so devoid of transcendent values. (*Kingdoms in Conflict*, Charles Colson, pp.225-227)

Consider, also, the findings of two Christian researchers concerning the state of the Christian church in the closing decades of the twentieth century:

... 42 percent of the Christians interviewed said that without the government’s laws, there would be no real guidelines for people to follow in daily life. When close to half of the Christian body overlook the Bible as an

authoritative guideline for society, the restricted relevance of faith and spiritual commitment in people's lives becomes clear. (*Vital Signs*, George Barna and William Paul McKay, p.142)

My son, fear Jehovah and the king, do not associate with those who seek revolution, ²²for they—[Jehovah and the king]—will send sudden calamity upon them, and who knows what destruction they can bring? (Prov. 24:21-22)

These verses remind us that we are to respect the legitimate authority of the civil government because it possesses a God-given authority, note Romans 13:1-2,

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. (Rom. 13:1-2)

But when is political protest legitimate? When is such protest required? First, we must protest when the civil government oversteps its bounds and “deifies” itself—i.e.; declaring that it is not accountable to God and assuming the position of God as lawmaker. By way of example, in 1987 Representative Lowell Wiecker of Connecticut, speaking on the floor of the House of Representatives, declared, “We are the law!” The civil government’s authority is derived from God, “*Pilate asked him, ‘Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not realize that I have the authority to release you, and the authority to crucify you?’ ¹¹Jesus replied, ‘You would have no authority against me, unless it had been given to you from above.’*” (Jn. 19:10-11a) As the Apostle Paul declares in Romans 13:4a, “[the ruler] is God’s servant to do you good.”

Second, we must protest when the civil government requires us to obey its dictates at the expense of God’s commandments. Note the testimony of the apostles as recorded in Acts 5:27b-29,

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” ²⁹Peter and the other apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:27b-29)

Third, we must protest when the civil government violates the moral law of God. Note Daniel’s appeal to King Nebuchadnezzar: “*O king, be pleased to accept my counsel. Renounce your sins by doing what is right; and your iniquities, by showing mercy to the poor. By so doing, you may possibly continue in your honorable state*” (Dan. 4:27.)

What forms does biblical protest take? It may consist in calling the civil authorities to accountability by reminding them of their office as servants of God and confronting them with their offenses—as did Daniel in the passages cited above. When necessary, it may take the form of refusing to obey the civil authority when they require us to disobey God—as did the apostles in the instance cited in Acts 5:27b-29 referred to above.

III. Fulfill Your Christian Obligation to Society, by Praying for the “Triumph” of Righteousness

(Proverbs 29:2; Proverbs 11:11)

When the righteous are in power the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people sigh. (Prov. 29:2)

When the righteous are in the majority and in positions of authority, the people rejoice. A righteous rule based upon the moral law of God and recognizing its accountability to God promotes peace and stability, and respects and safeguards the citizens’ God-given rights. Note Isaiah 32:1-2, which speaks of the righteous reign of godly king Hezekiah:

Look! A king will reign with righteousness, and his officials will rule with justice! ²This man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, he will be like streams of water in the desert, like the shadow of a great rock in a dry land. (Isa. 32:1-2)

Conversely, “*when a wicked man rules, the people sigh.*” Refusing to recognize their position under God as “legislators” of His moral law, wicked rulers become a law unto themselves, with the following dreadful consequences: 1) their decisions become final—they recognize no appeal to the higher law of God for justice; 2) their power becomes absolute—they know no bounds, extending their control over every area of the citizen’s lives; and 3) their toleration for any legitimate protest becomes non-existent—they meet protest with severe measures of repression.

By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted, but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked. (Prov. 11:11)

By the counsel they give, by the course they advocate, by the causes they champion, the wicked bring about the collapse of the society; such is the meaning of the statement, “*[the city] is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked.*” The truth of Proverbs 11:11 is traced out in Isaiah 5:20-25

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! ²¹Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! ²²Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and champions at

mixing strong drinks; ²³those who acquit the wicked for a bribe, and deny justice to the innocent! ²⁴Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw, and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their root will decay and their blossom will blow away like dust; because they have rejected the law of Jehovah of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. ²⁵Therefore, the anger of Jehovah burns against his people; his hand is raised against them and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like filth in the streets. But even after all this, his anger is not pacified; his hand is still raised against them. (Isa. 5:20-25)

The wicked counsel a departure from the divine standard in favor of a man-centered, self-constructed standard. They are *“wise in their own eyes,”* thinking themselves capable of devising their own standard (vs. 21,) and they have *“rejected the law of Jehovah of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel”* (vs. 24.) The result is that the fundamentals of morality are replaced by perversity: *“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”* (vs. 20.) This in turn causes the community to disintegrate: *“Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw, and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their root will decay and their blossom will blow away like dust; because they have rejected the law of Jehovah of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel”* (vs. 24.) Furthermore, it causes the community to become liable to the righteous judgment of the LORD: *“Therefore, the anger of Jehovah burns against his people; his hand is raised against them and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like filth in the streets. But even after all this, his anger is not pacified; his hand is still raised against them”* (vs. 25.)

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 we are exhorted to pray for the civil government:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— ²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Tim. 2:1-2)

Let us pray that God would grant us the blessing described in Isaiah 32:1-8,

Look! A king will reign with righteousness, and his officials will rule with justice! ²This man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, he will be like streams of water in the desert, like the shadow of a great rock in a dry land. ³And the eyes of those who can see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who can hear will listen. ⁴And the mind of the rash will comprehend knowledge, and the stammering tongue will be able to speak fluently. ⁵No longer will the fool be called noble, nor will the scoundrel be respected—⁶for the fool speaks folly and his heart desires to do what is wicked so as to practice godlessness and to cause men to stray from Jehovah. As a consequence, he empties the soul of the hungry and deprives the thirsty of drink. ⁷The scoundrel’s methods are evil; he devises wicked schemes intended to

destroy the poor by means of lies, even when the plea of the needy is just. ⁸But the noble man makes noble plans, and by his noble conduct he shall prevail.
(Isa. 32:1-8)

Verse 1 describes a government that returns to its true position of being a legislator of God's moral law under His authority. Verse 2 indicates that such a state of affairs brings moral and spiritual refreshment to the nation. Verses 3-4 indicate that the people themselves become characterized by a renewed sense of spiritual perception and understanding and responsiveness. Verses 5-8 describe the results of this transformation: there is clear discernment between good and evil—the fool and the scoundrel are recognized for what they are (vs. 5;) and there is the acceptance of what is good and true—the noble man is honored and supported (vs. 8.) As Isaiah 32:15 indicates, this is all the result of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon a nation: "*the palace will be abandoned, the populous city will be forsaken ... ¹⁵Such will be the state of the land until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high.*"

May our prayers be encouraged by the events that took place in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the closing years of the twentieth century. A Christian leader ministering in the former Soviet Union presented the following report:

We ... had a meeting with the Secretary of the Constitutional Commission ... They were to present the final draft of the new Constitution to Parliament the next day ... At the conclusion of the meeting, he asked if we would be willing to take a copy of his rough draft and give recommendations on how it could be restructured around Biblical principles. (ATIA Newsletter, March, 1992)

Under the headline, "Former Atheist Yeltsin Declares Christian Faith," the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reported the following story on June 15, 1992,

Baptized as a baby but an avowed atheist for most of his life, Russian President Boris Yeltsin returned to the Russian Orthodox Church on Sunday, seeking spiritual renewal for himself and his nation.

Mr. Yeltsin, 61, attended Pentecost services in a move that is not only personal, but symbolized Russia's return to its strong religious heritage.

Mr. Yeltsin called upon the nation to practice patience and humility and to strive for spiritual purification after more than seven decades of Communism ...

In a television interview last week on the anniversary of his election as Russia's first President a year ago, Mr. Yeltsin acknowledged that after years of atheism, he is now a believing Christian.

We should pray for the “triumph” of righteousness in our nation knowing that the ultimate triumph of righteousness shall only occur at the end of the age with the return of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and great glory, then shall be fulfilled the promise of Revelation 11:15, *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”*

Conclusion

Let us recognize our Christian obligation to the society in which we find ourselves. In reliance upon the grace of God, may we be found faithful in fulfilling that obligation.