

What Righteousness Includes

“Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.” (Proverbs 16:8; KJV).

INTRODUCTION

How does one go about becoming a righteous person? Does righteousness include other traits or is it a narrow concept?

Solomon indicates that righteousness is simply right living; he said it involves a broad approach to life which includes various qualities of character.

I. WISDOM

Righteousness depends partly upon wisdom. We cannot live and act right if we do not know what is right. Just as a tornado passing through a lumberyard cannot build a house, so ignorance cannot create good. Neither random action nor impulsive living produce constructive human enterprise. Therefore, the righteous seek to learn, and the Lord adequately supplies them.

For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright. . . . (Proverbs 2:6, 7; RSV).

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning (Proverbs 9:9; KJV).

For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy. . . . (Ecclesiastes 2:26; KJV).

II. LOVE

Solomon emphasized that the very purpose of educating our minds is to enable us to live fruitful lives. It equips us to continue the creation process—to produce good as the Lord does. But being righteous involves more than becoming wise. Wisdom is necessary but not sufficient for righteousness. There is another vital element. We must turn to Paul to learn more about it:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging

cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3; RSV).

We may have supreme skill with words; we may have all wisdom and all faith; and we may even make the ultimate sacrifice of giving up everything, including our lives. Yet, what does all this accomplish? All of these qualities are highly desirable if they lead to some good result, but in themselves they produce nothing. Moreover, God has the power to create a machine (containing neither life nor love) capable of magnificent speech, knowledge, faithful obedience, and total self-sacrifice. Yet it would be only a machine deserving no special reward. Paul continued, saying:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; NIV).

That critical element required to make wisdom (or words or faith or self-sacrifice) worth something is love. Love in a primitive form is simply an attraction or desire for something. Love in its most exalted form seeks harmony, unity, and constructive peace—agape love. This kind of love is the force that works with wisdom to generate good. Notice how similar in basic nature it is to Wisdom, the Grand Lady that Solomon described: It contains no evil. It is not jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, irritable, or resentful. Neither does it rejoice in wrong. On the contrary, it rejoices in right. Love seeks to promote only goodness and righteousness. It is patient and kind. It always protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. It is that quality of mind that permits wisdom to be fulfilled. John told how great it is when he said:

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:16; RSV).

III. TRUST

Having the highest form of love—*agape* love—means to abide in God. Therefore, Solomon advised trust in the Lord:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes; fear the Lord, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine (Proverbs 3:5-10; KJV).

The way of the Lord is strength to the upright (Proverbs 10:29; KJV).

He who walketh in his uprightness feareth the Lord. . . . (Proverbs 14:2; KJV).

Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established (Proverbs 16:3; KJV).

He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the Lord, happy is he (Proverbs 16:20; KJV).

The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe (Proverbs 18:10; KJV).

Agur agreed, saying:

. . . [God] is a shield unto them that put their trust in him (Proverbs 30:5; KJV).

As individuals we are small and insignificant in this vast and complicated universe. Our insight and our foresight are exceedingly limited. Of necessity we must rely a great deal upon our trust in the reliability of other people and the things in our world. One benefit of knowledge is that it can increase our confidence in the Lord and His ways. We can increasingly recognize that His ways are the ways of victory because His wisdom enables us to ultimately succeed in our struggles.

Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge. For it is a pleasant thing if thou keep them within thee: they shall withal be fitted in thy lips. That thy trust may be in the Lord, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee (Proverbs 22:17-19; KJV).

IV. CONFIDENCE

With this kind of trust, the righteous have confidence.

The fear of the Lord gives life: and he who has it will have need of nothing, no evil will come his way (Proverbs 19:23; BAS).

. . . the righteous are bold as a lion (Proverbs 28:1; KJV).

. . . he that putteth his trust in the Lord shall be made fat (Proverbs 28:25; KJV).

. . . he who trusts in the Lord is safe (Proverbs 29:25; RSV).

And the Lord has confidence in the righteous. Referring to Him, Solomon said:

. . . the upright are in his confidence (Proverbs 3:32; RSV).

. . . such as are upright in their way are his delight (Proverbs 11:20; KJV).

. . . the prayer of the upright is his delight (Proverbs 15:8; KJV).

. . . he loveth him that followeth after righteousness (Proverbs 15:9; KJV).

. . . he heareth the prayer of the righteous (Proverbs 15:29; KJV).

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to Jehovah than sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3; ASV).

With that mutual trust the Lord permits us to enjoy increasingly greater freedom to unleash our creative potential. But being irresponsible limits our freedom. As we do not allow young children or drunks to drive automobiles, neither will the Lord free us beyond our level of maturity. As we mature in righteousness, we gain freedom. Jesus said:

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (John 8:31; RSV).

Paul wrote:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1; RSV).

You, my friends, were called to be free men; only do not turn your freedom into license for your lower nature, but be servants to one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in a single

commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself."
But if you go on fighting one another, tooth and nail, all you can expect is mutual destruction (Galatians 5:13-15; NEB).

V. GOODNESS

The righteous are the Lord's obedient children in the world. We love Him as the good Father He is and seek to imitate all the noble virtues of life personified by His Son Jesus: love, mercy, kindness, generosity, patience, humility, obedience, unselfishness, self-control, industriousness, etc. These are the qualities that build up and promote joy and peace. The righteous seek good in their thoughts.

The desire of the righteous is only good. . . . (Proverbs 11:23; KJV).

He who eagerly seeks what is good finds much favour. . . . (Proverbs 11:27; NEB).

The thoughts of the righteous are right. . . . (Proverbs 12:5; KJV).

The mind of the righteous ponders before answering. . . . (Proverbs 15:28; MLB).

. . . as for the upright, he gives thought to his way (Proverbs 21:29; BAS).

They use their speech to promote good.

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. . . . (Proverbs 10:11; RSV).

The tongue of the just is as choice silver. . . . (Proverbs 10:20; KJV).

The lips of the righteous feed many. . . . (Proverbs 10:21; KJV).

The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable. . . . (Proverbs 10:32; KJV).

. . . the speech of the upright saves them (Proverbs 12:6; NAB).

. . . the words of the pure are pleasant words (Proverbs 15:26; KJV).

Indeed they use all their efforts to promote what is right and good. They plan good works themselves and support the good works of others.

The labour of the righteous tendeth to life. . . . (Proverbs 10:16; KJV).

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that is wise winneth souls (Proverbs 11:30; KJV).

A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast (Proverbs 12:10; KJV).

. . . the root of the righteous yieldeth fruit (Proverbs 12:12; KJV).

The righteous is a guide to his neighbor. . . . (Proverbs 12:26; ASV).

. . . the conduct of the pure is right (Proverbs 21:8; RSV).

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous (Proverbs 21:15; RSV).

When the righteous triumph, there is great glory (Proverbs 28:12; ASV).

When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice. . . . (Proverbs 29:2; KJV).

The just man has a care for the rights of the poor (Proverbs 29:7; NAB).

. . . the upright plan how to protect him [the blameless man] (Proverbs 29:10; MOFFATT).

Like the Lord our eternal Father, the righteous hate evil and oppose it.

A righteous man hates falsehood. . . . (Proverbs 13:5; RSV).

The highway of the upright is to depart from evil. . . . (Proverbs 16:17; KJV).

. . . he that keepeth his soul shall be far from them [the perverse] (Proverbs 22:5; ASV).

. . . those who convict the evildoer will fare well, and on them will come the blessing of prosperity (Proverbs 24:25; NAB).

. . . such as keep the law contend with them [the wicked] (Proverbs 28:4; KJV).

An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous. . . . (Proverbs 29:27; RSV).

CONCLUSION

In short, the righteous have a strong affection for the Lord and His noble ways, and so use both their minds and their bodies to carry out the Lord's plans to promote all the ways of godliness and oppose all the ways of ungodliness.

—Walter Porter