

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Is true righteousness in the middle lane?

(Jerry Fite)

The inspired writer of Ecclesiastes writes, “*Be not overmuch righteous; neither make thyself overwise: why shouldst thou destroy thyself? Be not overmuch wicked, neither be foolish: why shouldst thou die before thy time?*” (Eccl. 7:16-17).

The writer had seen in his life the times when righteous men would perish while living a righteous life, and the times when the wicked would prolong their life while living a wicked life (Eccl. 7:15). While it was a reality, it seemed incongruous to God’s general rule of prospering in righteousness and forfeiting long days by engaging in wickedness (cf. Psm. 34:12-16, Psm. 55:23, Prov. 10:27). The writer urges one to not to focus on these exceptions to the general rule and consequently think wrongly regarding righteousness and wickedness.

One is not to develop the wrong type of righteousness – “righteous overmuch”. This could have reference to a “self-righteousness” which pleases self, but is not in accordance to God’s standard of righteousness. For example, the Jews in Isaiah’s day were fasting, but doing so in connection with their “own pleasure”,

not living according to God’s standard of righteousness. They then complain that God has not noticed their “righteousness” (Isa. 58:1-9). Such a disillusioned people are appalled and dismayed when they suffer destruction.

One is not to multiply his wickedness- “*be not overmuch wicked*”, thinking the wicked seem to escape punishment in their lawlessness. When punishment is not forthcoming, one might be enticed to follow in their steps. In the absence of God immediately intervening in judgment, the Jews in Malachi’s day were going so far to say that God delighted in the evil, and it was vain to serve God (Malachi 2:17, 3:13-15). We know that judgment will come on all wickedness, so why multiply wickedness and place oneself in danger of suffering the result generally inflicted upon the wicked of “*dying before thy time*”?

Some have construed this passage to teach that we should practice “moderation”. If so, are we then to guard from being “too righteous”? And then, are we to be a little wicked, but not “overmuch wicked”?

God’s standard for righteousness today is the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16-17). There is no middle of the road in this standard. We are to be holy as God is holy and measure our holy lives by the stature of Christ (I Peter 1:15, Eph. 4:13). Walking in Jesus’ steps is the standard for us to follow (I Peter 2:21-23). One cannot get more holy than Jesus, but we must always strive to be like him. The “extreme” of holiness, Jesus Christ, is our standard for righteousness. Are we to find some middle ground regarding holy living? God forbid.

Being righteous before God will demand that we back off of our liberties as we strive to lead and encourage others to be saved in Christ (cf. I Cor. 10:23-11:1, I Cor. 9, etc.). In times of anxiety, due to persecution and conflict, we must turn to God in prayer and manifest gentleness to others (Phil. 4:5-6). But never can we take a middle ground regarding what God demands of us. Refusing to give “God-speed” to those who do not bring the teaching of Christ is not “extremism”. It is not being “righteous overmuch”. It is the standard we must follow (2 Jn. 9-11). “*He that feareth God shall come forth from them all*” (Eccl. 7:18).