

Thursday Evening Bible Class.

14th September 2021

They that Use this World

Ecclesiastes 7:16,17

Dear brothers and sisters

Eccles 7:16,17: *Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself ? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?*

These two verses explain a parallel line of thought, that seeking to be over-righteous and over wise is not the way of salvation, and so also the opposite is true. However, in these verses there seems to be a difficulty:

1)... should not the pursuit of righteousness be the goal of a Christian?

2) verse 17 seems to permit a certain amount of wickedness, as long as it is not too much, then you will be spared an untimely death.

In answer to 1:

No one should be seeking their own righteousness, but the righteousness of God. The righteousness of man amounts to nothing, and he cannot be justified or made right, no matter how righteous he is. Romans 10:3: *For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.* The righteousness that actually counts is the righteousness of God. A man is made right or justified by faith, and righteousness is counted to him because of faith. Romans 1:17: *For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.* Romans 4:3: *For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.* In another place Jesus explains

to his disciples: Luke 17:10 *So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.* (See also Philippians 3:9 and many other passages).

Being righteous, isn't about doing good deeds all the time, and being a wonderful person. It is what is expected of servants of Christ, indeed, this is no more than what God expects of all humans. This is not the righteousness that saves a man, or marks him out.

Instead it is as James explains showing faith by works. Having Faith is far more important, believing that what God has said he will do, He is well able to perform, and as a result of this making life decisions, and treating others, in conformity with that faith. James 2: 17-20 *Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yes, a man may say, you have faith, and I have works: shew me your faith without your works, and I will shew you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God; you do well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?* So we can see that righteousness by itself avails nothing, and faith by itself is nothing.

Returning to Q1: The focus of being over righteous is a reference to an over emphasis on doing good, and making a big thing of it, without recognising the above Truths. This is seen in many examples in Scripture, especially in the New Testament where it became trademark behaviour of the Pharisees. Their focus was appearing very pious and righteous, but they could not connect their works – to be seen of men – to Faith, because they were blinded by their own righteousness, to see the Saviour standing before them – he who did no sin. The examples of Pharisaical behaviour is spelled out in Matthew 6:1-7: *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in*

the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward... (Read to verse 7) See also Matthew 15:2-9, 1 Timothy 4:3, and summed up in Matthew 23:23-24: Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

Being righteous overmuch is just that, straining at a gnat, but in the event swallowing a camel, as in trying so hard to be what we think is righteous, we miss the much wider requirements, and understanding of the need for humility and forgiveness for our oft committed sins, which no amount of righteousness can undo.

Being overwise is a thought in a similar vein. Proverbs 23:4: Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom. Paul to the Romans speaks of being wise in our own conceits (11:25) and in Romans 12:3: *For I say, ... to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think;* to the Corinthians he reminds his readers: 1 Corinthians 1:19 -20: *For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?* All the wisdom that God requires of man is this: Job 28:28: *Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.*

Answer to Q2

Be not overmuch wicked... Is this suggesting that being just a little bit wicked is OK? Not at all. This verse cannot be taken in isolation, but belongs in its context to the previous verse, and is the second part in what is called a parallelism. (Parallelism is a rhetorical device that compounds words or phrases that have equivalent meanings so as to

create a definite pattern). So the parallel line of thinking, is that without the key elements of Divine wisdom, faith and belief, mankind has a tendency to either 1) elevate his own will, wisdom and his righteousness or more commonly 2) increase in stupid wilful and reckless sin.

The reason for this common indulgence in sin is because a lack of belief, and zero appreciation that God sees all – all things are naked and open unto Him (Hebrews 4:13) This type of person who is wicked overmuch are those who say *He hath said in his heart, God hath forgotten: he hides his face; he will never see it.* (Psalm 10:11) This excess in sin is often seen in those who defy the existence of God: and is aptly described in Ecclesiastes 8:11 *Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.*

Of course, this was exemplified in the nation of Israel. Who behaved worse than the nations they sought to copy and be like. Ezekiel 8:17 *Then he said unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? Is it a light thing to the house of Judah that they commit the abominations which they commit here? for they have filled the land with violence, and have returned to provoke me to anger: and, lo, they put the branch to their nose.*

Because of their overmuch sin, and excess in violence, their life as a nation was shortened, and finally cut off. There are individuals also who were cut off prematurely before they got old, because of their blasphemous excesses. We think of Er in Genesis 38:7-10, Ananias in Acts 5:5, Herod in Acts 12:23.