

Overrighteousness?

¹⁵In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

a righteous man perishing in his righteousness,
and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.

¹⁶Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise - why destroy yourself?

¹⁷Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool - why die before your time?

¹⁸It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other.

The man who fears God will avoid all extremes. - Ecclesiastes 7:15-18

This is, to say the least, a provocative passage. Is Solomon really suggesting that wisdom and righteousness can be overdone? Is he suggesting that a little bit of wickedness and a little bit of foolishness are both needed for leading a healthy and balanced life?

Ecclesiastes is a series of observations of life "under the sun." These are the observations of a man who has left no stone unturned in his pursuit of the meaning of life. He is not claiming to operate from some profound posture of spiritual insight. His is a wholly non-religious point of view. He is just looking at life as a man who has tried everything and is announcing his observations as to how life seems to work.

The terms had not yet been coined, but Solomon had observed the workings of what we today call "common grace" and "the common curse of God." On the one hand, God's sun and rain fall on both the righteous and the wicked while, on the other hand, no one is exempt from being touched by the consequences of living in a fallen creation. We might like to believe that the wicked will always perish and that the righteous will always prosper in this life, but that is just simply not the case. There may even be some life principles that trend that way, but life is not so easily manipulated, which is precisely why modern prosperity theology is so unreliable.

One side-effect of common grace and common curse is that we can easily deceive ourselves as to what the respective blessings and hardships of our own lives mean. One man may conclude that he is being divinely punished for something when he is not while another man may conclude that God is smiling down upon him when God is not smiling at all.

It seems obvious to me why engaging in excess wickedness is a bad idea. Still, some people wear their nonconformity as a badge of honor. Others are just so selfish and depraved that no degree of self-gratification, violence against others or indifference toward others even registers to their dead consciences. But, what can Solomon possibly mean when he warns about the perils of being overrighteous and overwise?

Solomon is warning about that righteousness in which a man engages so as to advance himself in this life or to promote himself in the eyes of others. He is talking about the righteousness with which a man deceives himself. Such "righteousness" may lend itself to boasting about its accompanying deeds and sacrifices. Such "righteousness" may pursue one isolated virtue or cause with such abandon that many other responsibilities and relationships of life suffer as a kind of collateral damage. In the final analysis, such "righteousness" may prove to be more divisive and serve more causes of wickedness than it proves to be a true reflection of the beauty of Christ.

Any righteousness that a man “generates” is not true righteousness. It is self-righteousness and taken to extremes, it is unattractive, legalistic, divisive and more unsettling for bystanders than engaging. There is a righteousness that is to be pursued with all of one’s heart, but it is not that righteousness by which a man seeks to gain the world or the adoration of onlookers. It is a true righteousness that can transform the inner man rather than simply mask it.

Jesus modeled to us a human life in perfect balance. He knew when to sing and celebrate with others and He knew when to weep with them and for them. He knew when to minister to the poor, but He also knew how to accept a gift. He knew when to take center stage and He knew when to withdraw for prayer. He showed us what true righteousness really looks like. Our own generated righteousness and our own efforts to show ourselves wise are a poor substitute for the righteousness of Jesus that is freely bestowed upon us by grace. Overrighteousness is a poor substitute for the power of God to change us.

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