

Right Turn Only

How Do You Decide What Is Right or Wrong?

I was raised in the age of giant bikes. There was no such thing as small children's bikes. So when I was seven, I was given a giant red Huffy bike. After finally mastering not falling, I had a special level of freedom. I was allowed to ride it on the sidewalk around the block. This was of course more of an adventure than going to Paris or visiting Australia. One day as I was taking my loop around the block, I came upon an elderly man who lived across the street. We got to talking and he invited me inside for a visit. I was seven and knew nothing about predatory adults, so I happily joined him for an hour long conversation. He was lonely; his wife had died, and I was just wanting to provide him some company. Finally I left and rode back home, thinking I would be greeted warmly for my kindness. No. It was quite the opposite. My dad was furious with me I may have even gotten a spanking for being gone. My father was a police officer and looking back I am certain he knew of all sorts of horror stories of young children disappearing. But I was young and could not comprehend his anger. I had done nothing wrong I felt, in fact should have been lauded for bringing some companionship to a lonely old man. This was the first time I came up against the right/wrong quandary. Who decides what is right and wrong and how do you know which is which? Today we will take a deep look into the second piece of armor described in Ephesians, the breastplate of righteousness. Our big idea is rather simple. Turn right every time.

Here is the phrase we are examining. **Stand firm then... with the breastplate of righteousness in place...** (Ephesians 6: 14a, c NIV) Another way to translate the last part is **putting on the breastplate of fairness**. The idea is that if you are to stand on the day of evil and thrive, you must do this work of putting on the breastplate of fairness. No one else can do it for you. It is your job alone to have this and as we mentioned with regard to truth, it is a daily work of yours, something you must take care of even throughout the day. The term translated breastplate had two parts to it, one covering the chest and the other on the opposite side covering the back. Many make much over the armor and its connection to each quality we are to have. Interpretations have been quite imaginative and even inspiring, but the truth is that the Scripture gives no commentary on what to think about each type of armor listed. It seems best to see the specific pieces of armor as simply a metaphor without any specific meaning. They convey the idea of each of the qualities we must have in our character in a memorable and creative way. Perhaps there is a deeper meaning to each of the protective parts, but it seems extremely speculative guessing at what that might be.

Let us consider the most important aspect of this command. The Greek term we are commanded to keep in place is "dikaiosuney" and it does mean righteousness but even more than that. There is a tremendous depth to this word. It can be rendered justice, fairness, even generosity. The chief idea of it is "doing what is right, what is good and fair". The law of God that is established in the Old Testament had an application to this command that embodies this term. **Do not have two differing weights in your bag — one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house — one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. For the Lord your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.** (Deuteronomy 25: 13-16 NIV) You could call this the lemon law of ancient times. Businesses were not under any circumstances to cheat customers. If you are selling an omer of wheat, it is to be precisely that. You are never to use a weight or measure that is not exactly what you claim it is. Fairness, rightness was the standard for all God's people. I read recently that a customer bought a car from a car lot and the title had been altered to not indicate that the truck was supposed to be taken out of service permanently because of safety issues. The Lord demands that His people are fair, honest and generous in every dealing and relationship.

The Bible makes it crystal clear. There is a right right and a wrong wrong and the standards of both are spelled out by God. Let me give another example of the way right right is noted in Scripture. **The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.** (Leviticus 19: 34 NIV) If the law of God had been followed in the US, we never would have had slavery because it is explicit. The law of God when it comes to relationship is you love others as you love yourself regardless of where they are from or how they look. This same concept of right and wrong is further expressed in God's law. **'Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.'** (Leviticus 19: 17-18 NIV) The New Testament summarizes precisely the parameters of right and wrong in all relationships. **The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself.** (Galatians 5: 14 NIV)

The Greek term translated righteousness, as in “breastplate of righteousness is “dikaiosune” and I translated it as fairness but it also can and maybe should be rendered generosity. In a country where devotion to God is not the rule of law, something like what happened to poor Naboth is not only possible, it is commonplace. Naboth owned a plot of land that had been passed down to him across generations. Ahab, the king of Israel wanted it because it would be a convenient site for a vegetable garden. When Naboth refused to sell it, Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife arranged for Naboth to be murdered and then King Ahab simply seized it as his own. **When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.** (1 Kings 21: 16 NIV) That is how government can and does operate when devotion to Christ is not determining the operating system of those in power. The first time I went to Russia, I was warned by one of my students that the police often detained people and threatened arrest if they were not offered a bribe. The atrocities of Nazi Germany, Communist China and Stalinist Russia were the result of the loss of God in government policy. It is Christian faith, or at least the memory of it, that keeps nations from becoming cruel and cannibalistic where the weak are trampled and oppressed by the strong.

Righteousness, as in the breastplate of righteousness is marked by generosity. Two parables of Jesus give us a clear picture of what the Bible means by righteousness. The first is the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Biblical righteousness looks precisely like the Samaritan. You know the story I guess. A Jew was walking along a deserted road and he was beaten badly and robbed of his clothing. Two Jewish religious leaders walked past the half-dead victim and did nothing to help him. But a Samaritan, (Samaritans were almost universally hated by Jews) came upon him and bandaged the Jewish mugging victim, put him on his donkey and took him to an inn where he paid the innkeeper to take care of the poor man until he could return and see what else was needed. **'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'**(Luke 10: 35 NIV) That is the Biblical idea of righteousness, kindness and generosity built into your daily approach to life. A second parable that illustrates the sort of righteousness described in our key verse is commonly referred to as the “Prodigal Son”. It tells the story of a son who demands of his father his inheritance, while the father was still living, and uses the money to go far away and waste it on perverse, wild living. Broke and destitute the son returns home, hoping against hope that his father will let him be a lowly servant. However, the father, who had been day after day straining to spot his son’s return, wraps his arms around the young man and joyfully throws a huge party in honor of his arrival. Extravagant love and undeserving forgiveness mark the personality of the one walking in Jesus’ footsteps and possessing the sort of characteristics this kind of righteousness, a breastplate of righteousness entails.

You can turn left like the vast majority of people and never wear the breastplate of righteousness. You can do as you please and let your feelings determine your actions. Practical atheism is nothing more than choosing your lifestyle without God and His Word governing your decision making. The sort of lifestyle exhibited by the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son’s father is not normal and requires the power of God to sustain it. An example of the righteousness God is espousing is the right turn Joseph took after his brothers sold him into slavery as a late teen. Years later, after great hardship and suffering, Joseph was delivered by God from an Egyptian prison into the position of second in command of all of Egypt. Under God’s perfect orchestration, Joseph’s brothers, who he hadn’t seen in almost two decades showed up in Egypt begging for food. A famine reduced his brothers and their families to desperation, and they went to Egypt because it was the only place they could reach where there was still grain. When the brothers arrived, they were sent to Joseph who was in charge of the stockpiled grain distribution. Ironically, the brothers didn’t recognize Joseph, but he did know who they were. The brothers, when they found out it was Joseph who they had cruelly sold into slavery with the power to let them and their families starve to death, became frightened. But the sort of breastplate of righteousness the Bible says we are to put on daily, Joseph had in place. His declaration revealed what was guarding his heart. It was the kindness and rightness of God. **But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.** (Genesis 50: 19-21 NIV) Our big idea is clear when it comes to having God protect you. Turn right every time. Be generous in your relationships and let kindness rule the day for you.