



Righteousness Reexamined

Ephesians 6:14 NIV

Stand firm then...with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

What Do You Make of Your Behavior?

There is a word often connected to the Bible that is rarely in our conversations today. The very mention of the word triggers a variety of emotions within people. When they hear this word used, they immediately struggle with processing whatever topic it introduces. Righteousness used to be a perfectly acceptable term, one that was even honored and valued in most social circles. Now though, it is often dismissed as sounding preachy, judgmental, condemning. There is no fun in righteousness, no pleasure in it. Righteousness feels old-fashioned, dated. It may be astounding to discover though that righteousness is a key to emotional and psychological health, a critical component of happiness and wellness. Morality is the number one trait people care about when evaluating others, when deciding how far to go in a relationship. It is because we want righteous people around us, good people in the workplace, in our classrooms and at home. Now there may be disagreements on how morality and righteousness look, but we can agree that they play a critical part in how happy we are at home and at work. Righteousness is universally needed and should be championed as a key aspect to having a good life and here is why.

If you think of righteousness as an outward show of things that doesn't match what is really within you, then you would be right to dismiss it. The Bible never sees righteousness that way. True, God developed righteousness is a complete reshaping of the self so that the inner part matches the outward appearance. Righteousness is through and through if it is to be of any good. One of the more fascinating people described in the Bible is the first king of Israel, Saul. Saul reluctantly accepted the position of king. He didn't really want the job and tried to avoid the public spotlight, but then he quickly won the hearts of the nation when he led the Hebrew army to a great victory over the Aramean forces who had invaded the land. He was instantly a national hero.

Although Saul started off successfully as a king, it didn't end well, and he lost his way. The prophet Samuel gave strict orders before Saul entered his next battle against the Philistines to wait with his army until he arrived to offer a sacrifice to the Lord as way of seeking His protection in battle. Saul grew scared though when Samuel had not shown yet on the day he said he would come, and the Philistine army was massive and so menacing that most of his soldiers had already deserted. Saul in his fear and lack of faith felt he had no choice but to present the sacrifice without the prophet being there. When Samuel arrived at the camp after Saul offered the sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel to do it, he sternly rebuked Saul for failing to obey God. **"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time.** (1 Samuel 13:13 NIV)

Perhaps one might wonder why God would be so harsh with Saul for what seems like such a small act of disobedience when Saul's heart appeared right. He did after all offer the sacrifice for God's honor. There is no time to go into the specifics of what was so critical about the command and why it meant so much to God but suffice it to say that clearly the Lord was serious about strict obedience here. God was establishing a brand new kingdom and it was crucial that its first king be absolutely committed to following the Lord so he might be an example of loyalty to the Lord for future kings to follow. Without righteous kings, the entire nation could fall away from God and live like the pagan nations surrounding them. Leaders are critical to the direction groups take. They set the pace for families, organizations, businesses, churches and nations. Leaders are influencers. King Saul was an influencer and you are one too. You may not even be aware of how impactful you are on others, but rest assured someone is watching you and in some way following your example. You play a critical part in the lives of others, and like Saul, you affect the way people think and behave.

Not long after this, Saul again disobeyed God. He was commanded by the Lord and his army knew of the order, to completely destroy everything belonging to the Amalekites, a neighboring pagan country. However, Saul thought it was pragmatic to not kill off all the sheep and cattle. He decided it was better, and we know he was influenced by his chief officers to see it this way, to take the best of the sheep and cattle and barbecue them and serve them up to the men as a way of honoring God in a sort of fellowship meal or offering. This was though a direct violation of God's instructions. Samuel of course did not buy Saul's excuse for not destroying all the plunder and responded with one of the most oft-quoted rebukes found in the Bible. **"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."** (1 Samuel 15:22-23 NIV)

We have much to learn from the ancients described in the Scriptures and in particular King Saul. Not long after his very public disobedience to God's commands, Saul's personality began to splinter. He struggled with a debilitating temper, battled unreasonable jealousy and became disconnected from his oldest son. Depression sank in and he suffered from terrible bouts of despair. We have been trained to think of all emotional struggles as a being the result of psychological, sociological or biological factors and often that is the case. Hardly however, do you hear of the spiritual component to internal struggles. Depression is clearly connected in the account of Saul to his disobedience and linked to spiritual forces of evil that confounded his thinking. His angry outbursts were too, and they resulted in broken relationships with his son, daughter and his best and most faithful general.

It is interesting what we see with David who was Saul's successor as king. In contrast to Saul, David did exactly what God told him to do and his personality reflected that. He was courageous, calm in difficult circumstances, peaceful and confident that even though he was facing tough odds, God would see him through it. He had such joyful enthusiasm that he was brought to Saul's palace to play the harp for Saul when depression and anxiety hit. The sort of spiritual attacks upon Saul were not there for David because his righteousness protected his mind. Even Saul noted the contrast between himself and David. **"You are more righteous than I," he said. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly.** (1 Samuel 24:17 NIV) Saul even wept when he thought about the difference between the two of them.

Consider the great inner strength of Job, who after losing all his wealth and then his children and eventually his health, still remained psychologically robust and emotionally resilient. Few of us could have withstood such a furious assault by Satan and kept our footing psychologically. The Bible insists all Job's suffering was due to a full on attack by the devil; it was the work of supernatural forces and yet Job toughed it out and much of his strength of character can be attributed to his righteousness. He gave to the poor, was a man of integrity, honesty and such moral fortitude that he even refused to look at women lustfully. We know nothing of his intellect, creativity or ingenuity. All we have to explain his fierce psychological toughness was

how true to God Job was in what he did and how he thought. Just listen to the description given of Job when he is introduced to us in the beginning of the book that bears his name. **This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.** (Job 1:1 NIV) Is it any wonder that such a person as this, out of all of us could remain sane after such horrific things happened to him?

The Bible insists that there are spiritual forces of evil fighting against you and part of your defense against them, a critical part of it is righteousness. Just by doing what the Lord says to do, you fend off Satan and spiritual forces of evil. Is it possible that depression, anxiety, anger, jealousy and other emotional struggles may be the result of spiritual forces working against you and within you and not just sociological and psychological factors? The Bible says to wear the breastplate of righteousness because we do battle with the devil and spiritual forces of evil. **Stand firm then...with the breastplate of righteousness in place,** (Ephesians 6:14 NIV) What does the breastplate cover? It's the heart, what we often refer to as the center of emotional and psychological well-being. Could it be that if you don't do what God says and live in faithful obedience to him, you put yourself in harm's way emotionally and psychologically? But think what a great protection righteous living is for us! Just doing what God says to do, whether it is telling the truth, forgiving those who treat you badly, protecting your heart from sexual sin, worshiping God faithfully, supporting the church and being a part of God's people, you will save yourself from many of the hurts Satan and spiritual forces can inflict on you. Read your Bible. Pray. Talk about salvation with others. It all is a way to protect you from depression, anxiety and anger because Satan will be pushed back from you simply by you doing what God says to do. If we just take the Ten Commandments and start to work our way through them, making sure we do what each one says, what marvelous peace and comfort we might have! What great inner strength is found in just doing what God says to do!