

Seven Principles of Righteousness

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

—*Romans 3:23*

THE DIVINE STANDARD OF

righteousness embodies the thought of being just, perfect, and pure in every sense of the word. “All unrighteousness is sin,” the Apostle John says. (I John 5:17) Following the fall of Adam and Eve back in Eden, there have been no human examples of absolute righteousness with the exception of Christ Jesus. After the deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh’s bondage, God established a covenant relationship with that nation which required the people to manifest holy conduct. (Lev. 20:26) As descendants of Abraham, the Jews did not fully appreciate his example of obedience, and therefore, violated their covenant with God repeatedly. There are, however, many principles illustrated in God’s dealings with Israel as well as various individuals whose lives are recorded in the Old Testament that may be instructive for consecrated believers in Christ to emulate during this Gospel Age. We will look at seven such principles in our subject under consideration.

GOD'S FAVOR

Principle #1—Failure to obey God's righteous counsel results in the loss of special favor. Although Abraham, like the rest of Adam's children, was born "in sin" and "shapen in iniquity," he was declared righteous because he demonstrated faith and works of obedience. (Ps. 51:5; Heb. 11:8-10,17-19) At the time of the giving of the Law Covenant at Sinai, God dealt with the nation of Israel as one people under a theocratic arrangement, and they would be a special "treasure" to him if they obeyed his laws. When informed by Moses that this was what God had in store for them, the people declared, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do." (Exod. 19:5-8) Moses instructed the people in righteous behavior. Additionally, a system of sacrifices was instituted to sensitize the nation concerning the divine requirements, and to bring to their attention their moral failures and general waywardness. Nevertheless, the nation of Israel repeatedly practiced idolatry and embraced customs of their heathen neighbors. As a result, they were punished by God, eventually going into captivity to Gentile nations for a long period of time.—Lev. 26:14-39

Since Christ Jesus opened a new and living way for his consecrated followers during this Gospel Age, let us through obedience achieve what Israel after the flesh failed to do. "As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." (I Pet. 1:14-16) Paul also reminds us that we need to sow to the spirit rather than to the flesh. We

should be able to clearly discern whether we are striving to keep our bodies under restraint and are focused upon doing things which promote our spirituality, rather than catering to sinful desires and fleshly interests. With many stimuli surrounding us that might tend to divert us from serving Christ faithfully, we must keep our covenant to mortify the deeds of the flesh and to walk in newness of life diligently, so as to fulfil our vows of consecration.—Gal. 6:7,8; Col 3:1-3; Rom. 6:3,4

LOVING CORRECTION

Principle #2—Chastisement for instruction in righteousness is an evidence of God's love. Moses prophesized that in due time a great Prophet would be raised up to speak in God's name. (Deut. 18:15-19) The coming of a Messiah became well established in Jewish thought and expectations. During Jewish captivity under Gentile powers, the people had the hope of a deliverer who would restore them to great prominence. In fact, Messiah's appearance generally was predicted around the time of Jesus' birth. (Dan. 9:24-27; Luke 3:15) However, it was not then understood that the full impact of Moses' prophecy would occur at the Lord's Second Advent, to be fulfilled in the Christ, Head and Body. When Israel rejected Christ as their Savior, they lost their homeland and received much hostility at the hands of their enemies. With the completion of the bride of Christ, Israel's blindness will be removed. (Rom. 11:25-27) This acknowledges God's love for them, as they then will be restored to his full favor.

The psalmist said, "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word." (Ps. 119:67)

As consecrated believers, if we can ever keep this thought in mind, then during our difficulties we can take comfort that our loving Father has lessons for us to learn so we may be purified and rely upon him more closely. Such chastening is designed to assist us in yielding the “peaceable fruit of righteousness.” (Heb. 12:5-11) The Apostle Paul recounts in Galatians 2:11-21 an occasion when it was necessary for him to rebuke the Apostle Peter. When Peter first came to Antioch, he freely ate with Christian converts who formerly were Gentiles. Subsequently, Peter ceased to fellowship with them while in the presence of Jewish Christians for fear that news of his conduct would get back to Jerusalem. Peter well knew, in connection with the conversion of Cornelius, that God was not a respecter of persons. (Acts 10:34) Therefore, he erred by refusing to eat with uncircumcised believers, implying that the Mosaic law afforded a higher level of sanctification than the righteousness of faith. Paul, appropriately, accused Peter of hypocrisy by pointing out that Jewish Christians had a new standing on the basis of faith in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, and that they were “dead to the law.” May we avoid the need for God’s rebuke resulting from our exercise of partiality when dealing with others.

ADVERSITY AN AID TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Principle #3—Personal adversity may be permitted for the crystallization of a righteous character. The deep fatherly love bestowed by Jacob upon Joseph evidently was reciprocated by this righteous, faithful, obedient and loving son. While feeding the

flocks in the fields with his brethren, Joseph observed their conduct. Upon returning home, he gave his father, Jacob, a report concerning their evil activities. (Gen. 37:2) If that were not enough to incur his brethren's hatred, Joseph's receipt of a "coat of many colours" from Jacob made them envious. (vss. 3,4) Additionally, his dreams which he shared with his brothers that seemed to imply some future exaltation over them intensified their anger towards him. Their animosity towards him was so strong that when he sought his brethren in the fields, they put him in a pit and subsequently sold him to Midianite traders who brought him to Egypt.—vss. 18-36

In Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, serving him faithfully until Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce him. As a righteous and loyal servant, he resisted her but was falsely accused and put into prison. During that period, he served the prison keeper's interests and also correctly interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's former servants who had fallen into disfavor with the king. Later, Joseph properly interpreted two troublesome dreams of the king, which resulted in his release from prison and exaltation to the right hand of Pharaoh. Under his wise leadership, Joseph oversaw Egypt's prosperity during a time of famine that affected all the surrounding areas as well.—Gen. 41:39-41

A lesson for the church at this time is that we not react with anger when permitted to receive hostile treatment at the hands of others. Rather, we are to remember that such experiences are vital to our Christian development in righteousness.

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.” (I Pet. 4:12,13) As New Creatures in Christ, we must rid ourselves of the works of the flesh if we are to be more than overcomers and associates of the Master in his kingdom. Our serious endeavors to identify our weaknesses and rectify them should be of paramount importance in our lives. Joseph will not be the recipient of the divine nature, but he has been set forth as an example of devotion and fidelity to God. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and with the prospect of reigning with Christ and helping to bless the world in the kingdom, let us redouble our efforts to heed this admonition. “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.”—Eph. 4:31

NON-RETALIATION AGAINST EVILDOERS

Principle #4—The execution of vengeance is solely God’s prerogative. There is a bumper sticker which is sometimes found on cars that reads, “I don’t get mad, I get even.” As recorded in Genesis, chapters 42-45, that was surely not the spirit shown by Joseph after being raised to power in Egypt, and then meeting his brethren, who came to purchase grain during seven years of famine. When they approached Joseph, he recognized them, but they knew him not. Joseph accused them of being spies, and put them in prison. He then demanded that they return to their home and bring Benjamin back

to see him, while keeping Simeon as a hostage. If Joseph were of a different sort, he could have inflicted a great amount of punishment upon his brethren for the manner in which they treated him previously. When they returned to Egypt, he had a banquet prepared and ate with them while observing his beloved brother Benjamin, who accompanied them on this occasion. As a means of determining whether they had changed from their harsh ways, he had a silver cup secretly placed in Benjamin's sack of grain, and after they had started journeying to their home, he sent servants after them and accused Benjamin of stealing the cup. As punishment, Benjamin was to become Joseph's slave in Egypt. This proved to be a test to his brothers as to whether they were willing to lose Benjamin and save themselves. Here are the words of Judah in response to the situation they now faced. "How shall I go up to my father, and the lad be not with me? lest peradventure I see the evil that shall come on my father." (Gen. 44: 34) Moved by this seeming change of heart by his brothers, as they now were concerned for Jacob's feelings, Joseph revealed his true identity to them.

Some years later, after Jacob came to live in Egypt and following his death, Joseph's brethren thought that he would now hate them and take vengeance upon them because of how they treated him many years ago, prior to his exaltation in Egypt. Thus, they fell before him and declared they would be his servants. (Gen. 50:15-18) Here is how Joseph responded: "Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto

good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.” (vss. 19-21) What a marvelous spirit this faithful member of the house of servants demonstrated.

As footstep followers of Christ, there are no circumstances wherein we should retaliate or demonstrate vindictiveness towards anyone who has mistreated us, especially our brethren. We should always be solicitous of their well-being, and seek to recover them from their wrongful actions, hoping for a change in their behavior. God will never allow anything to harm our spiritual interests if we wait upon his leading for direction. (Rom 8:28) One of the challenges to the followers of Christ is to endure opposition from others in an uncomplaining manner. Our lives are being transformed, and we are not to be in harmony with the general practices of the world along this line. Since we are striving to walk in Christ’s footsteps, we should not be surprised to find that we may be evil spoken of just as was our dear Redeemer, who opened not his mouth when he was being led “as a lamb to the slaughter.” (Isa. 53:7) If we put on the whole armor of God, it will assist us in enduring the scorn and disapproval of others as we observe the following exhortation being fulfilled in our lives: “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”—II Tim. 3:12

WATCHFULNESS AND PRAYER

Principle #5—God answers the prayers of the righteous in his own manner and time. The Prophet

Habakkuk was a God-fearing, righteous individual who was deeply troubled with the state of ungodliness that existed among the people of Israel. He wanted to know how long God would allow this condition of things to continue. The people sinned with seeming impunity and injustice was prevalent. God informed Habakkuk that a terrible and mighty army would rise up to punish Israel, swiftly, violently and most thoroughly. (Hab. 1:1-10) In response to his questions concerning the duration of evil before righteousness would prevail, God gave Habakkuk a vision as a response. "The LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."—Hab. 2:2,3

Throughout the Christian era, God's children have been disturbed with the evil that surrounds them, as they await the long-promised kingdom of righteousness that will end earth's weary night. We might even question how much longer present conditions in society can endure without worldwide catastrophic consequences, or how we may overcome some of our personal weaknesses which seem to hamper our spiritual growth. We are living at a time where the foregoing answer to Habakkuk's query appears to have been penned for our admonition and encouragement today. Let us appreciate Habakkuk's model of communicating with our Heavenly Father with prayer and watchfulness, as we realize our deliverance from earth's sinful condition is nearer than when we first believed. (Rom. 13:11) "Watch

and pray,” the Master said, “that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”—Matt. 26:41

NEED FOR STEADFASTNESS

Principle #6—God expects the righteous to remain steadfast regardless of the environment which surrounds them. “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” (Heb. 11:7) Noah was an exception to the rule of evil, which predominated before the flood. At the time that the ark was completed, only Noah and his immediate family were saved from destruction.—Gen. 7:1-7

Noah lived for a period of 950 years, and probably endured hundreds of years of violence and demonic activity prior to the flood. Yet, as a member of the house of servants, he patiently did the will of God in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. Noah endured faithfully during the first dispensation, through a period of evil which required the ending of one world order by means of a flood and the commencement of a new one.—II Pet. 2:5; 3:6

As Spirit-begotten members of the body of Christ, and watchers during the present Gospel Age harvest, we have observed many signs which suggest God’s kingdom is near. The “desire of all nations” shall soon come, even though we do not know the precise moment when this time of blessing will commence. (Hag. 2:7) Since we are admonished to be faithful unto death, if we are walking in the ways of righteousness, it really should not matter

to us that we do not know the exact date when God will culminate this evil order which presently exists. Let us continue to immerse our minds towards diligence with regard to personal study of the Scriptures, regular attendance at meetings and conventions, and living a life of sacrifice, by seeking strength and direction from the throne of heavenly grace. Paul knew that the brethren at this time of the age would need encouragement and therefore penned this admonition for our strengthening: “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.”—Heb. 10:35,36

BASIS FOR FORGIVENESS

Principle #7—Repentance and confession of sin precede forgiveness from God. David is described as a man after God’s own heart. (Acts 13:22) Yet, because he was a member of the fallen human race, he committed sin. Two unrelated incidents in which he was involved demonstrate the principle under consideration. David engaged in adultery by taking to his bed a beautiful married woman named Bathsheba. He not only committed sin with Bathsheba, but in an attempt to cover this up, he also arranged for the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, who was one of his bravest and most faithful officers.—II Sam. 11:2-24

Ultimately, however, David repented and confessed these most grievous sins which he had committed. His words have been recorded in the Scriptures for our instruction as he prayed to the Heavenly Father. “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,

and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.”—Ps. 51:2-4

Another example of David sinning was when he directed Joab to number the Israelites, presumably because he was beginning to rely upon the number of people available for battle, rather than continuing to trust in the Lord for victory. Joab had warned David against doing this, and God was displeased with David’s actions. He subsequently recognized this transgression and confessed his sin upon realizing the error of his ways. “God was displeased with this thing; therefore he smote Israel. And David said unto God, I have sinned greatly, because I have done this thing: but now, I beseech thee, do away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.”—I Chron. 21:1-8

In contrasting David’s sin with Bathsheba and the taking of a census, we might tend to overlook the seriousness of this second matter. In the case of consecrated believers, Paul speaks about some gross sins, that if committed, would be a barrier towards entering into the kingdom honors. (I Cor. 6:9-11) Many of the Lord’s people may have committed some of those sins prior to consecration, but now, having been washed and among the sanctified, no longer engage in such practices. Nevertheless, if we harbor unrighteous thoughts, engage in evil surmising or speaking, all of which might seem to us as being less serious sins, we would not be manifesting purity of heart which is *(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 31) essential if we are going to receive God's approval. (Matt. 5:8) When we discover we have fallen short in any of these or related areas, even when we may feel they are relatively minor sins, let us promptly repent of the error of our ways. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."—I John 1:9

LESSON SUMMARY

We have considered the highly important matter of righteous conduct and avoiding sin, by reviewing seven principles exemplified in the nation of Israel and four godly individuals listed in the Old Testament, including Joseph, Habakkuk, Noah and David. As consecrated, Spirit-begotten believers who presently are seeking to be a part of the body of Christ, our conduct should reflect the highest standards of righteousness in our thought, speech, and actions. We sometimes may stumble into sin unintentionally, but if this should occur, may we immediately repent of our conduct, expressing to the Heavenly Father deep regret for our failure to be more watchful. Any attempt to justify our actions would further compound the matter and be most displeasing to God.

Rather, let us promptly avail ourselves of the merciful provision at the throne of grace. "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."—I John 2:1,2 ■