

Moral Standards

***“Who is wise,
and he shall
understand these
things? prudent,
and he shall know
them? for the ways
of the LORD are
right, and the just
shall walk in
them: but the
transgressors shall
fall therein.”
—Hosea 14:9***

THE TERM “MORALITY” IS taken from a Latin word meaning “manner, character, proper behavior.” Morality is further defined as “principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior.” Of concern to many today is the growing lack of recognition of these differences. More and more, that which in the past

may have been considered right or wrong, and good or bad behavior, has often lost these distinctions. In addition, those who continue to hold to former, stricter, standards of morality are accused of not being inclusive; of being “old-fashioned” and not keeping up with the so-called “progress” of modern thinking; or worse, condemned as being intolerant, extremists or even haters.

In conjunction with the above, and specifically with regard to the personal and intimate relationships between one person and another, numerous terms and phrases have come into regular use by government leaders, activist groups, the news media,

and among the general public. Such expressions as: LGBTQ; same-sex marriage; significant other; transgender; bisexual; gender identity; non-binary; and other related terms that we read and hear of today were seldom if ever part of public conversation in the past.

As Christians, what are we to make of this, and how should we respond? We answer that the Bible is to be the standard for the follower of Christ. In the opening chapter of the book of Genesis, we find the words, “God created man in his own image.” (Gen. 1:27) In the next chapter we read, “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground, breathed life into his lungs, and the man became a living being. ... Later, the LORD God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make for him a companion that is a suitable match for him. ... so the LORD God caused a deep sleep to overshadow the man. When the man was asleep, he removed one of the man’s ribs and closed up the flesh where it had been. Then the LORD God formed the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. ... Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:7,18, 21,22,24, *International Standard Version*) In the course of time, however, this male and female pair fell from their created purity and sin entered the world.

Throughout the ensuing ages following our first parents’ fall into sin, many perversions of the relationship between man and woman became entangled in human society. Thus, centuries later in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul gave these

strongly worded statements: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." "Put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires."—I Cor. 6:9-11; Col. 3:5, *New Living Translation*; see also Rom. 1:18-27

Our present responsibility as Christians, we believe, is to be guided by the Bible's teachings regarding moral purity, both toward ourselves, and also as we speak to those with whom we come in contact who might question our beliefs, or who may have a receptive ear to the testimony of the Scriptures. Judgment of others' personal standing before God, however, is not our responsibility at the present time. In this regard we are warned by Jesus, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." (Matt. 7:1) With these things in mind, let us examine some examples from the Word of God which provide lessons and guidance that may be of help to us, both as relates to our own walk, and as we also come in contact with others.

ISRAEL'S WAYWARDNESS

In our opening Scripture the Prophet Hosea addresses the words of Jehovah to the nation of Israel. God's chosen people had fallen into a condition of national infidelity and a general departure

from God's favor. This lay heavily upon the prophet, and he sought to draw attention to their disreputable state and moral degeneration. The nation had become depraved through idolatry, and a reckless attitude toward moral values had resulted. Indeed, Hosea's own domestic troubles seem to have been permitted by the Lord to impress upon him the divine viewpoint of Israel's unfaithfulness to Jehovah.—Hos. 1:2-9; 2:1-13

As we examine Hosea's prophecy, we note his declaration that God had a "controversy" with the people of Israel in that there was no fidelity to their covenant relationship. There was no more kindness in their attitude toward God or their fellow man, and there was no "knowledge of God in the land." Their consciences numbed respecting God's laws and providences, the Israelites had forgotten about God and their need for him. (Hos. 4:1-6) Hosea, whose name appropriately means "salvation," was deeply concerned for the salvation, or recovery, of his people from their wicked ways. Thus, he warned them of the punishment that would surely come upon them if they failed to turn and repent. Later, in Hosea 6:1-3, the prophet pleads with his people to return to God and receive once again of his loving-kindness and forgiveness.

Hosea points out that debauchery, infidelity, and drunkenness were present not only among the people, but even in high places of authority in Israel as well. (Hos. 7:1-7, *NLT*) Such conduct would bring grave consequences if not acknowledged and corrected. This lesson may be applied not only to ancient Israel, but also to the people and nations of our contemporary society.

God's concern for his people, as a loving father for his own children, is also shown in Hosea's message. "I will not completely destroy Israel, for I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come to destroy. For someday the people will follow me. I, the LORD, will roar like a lion. And when I roar, my people will return trembling from the west. Like a flock of birds, they will come from Egypt. Trembling like doves, they will return from Assyria. And I will bring them home again, says the LORD." (Hos. 11:9-11, *NLT*) As we ponder these words we are impressed with the mercy and tenderness of God toward the Israelites. God is also interested in the eternal welfare of all his human children, and through the agencies of his coming kingdom, "the inhabitants of the world shall learn righteousness."—Isa. 26:9

DAVID'S EXPERIENCE

The Scriptures speak of David as a man after God's own heart. (I Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22) However, with all his attainments, wisdom, skill, sound judgment, and even his humility and reverence for God, the fallen human nature of this servant of God succumbed to evil and immoral temptations. On the surface, it seems hard to account for such sins in one with so strong a character.

David's transgressions, however, were likely not altogether sudden. There had most surely been missteps along the way. The process was gradual with a climax reached almost imperceptibly. David had likely become infected with the prideful attitude which in this world often attends power, popularity and success. As a result, he was, no doubt, greatly

oblivious to his own moral weakness. As king, his word was supreme, and the people of Israel waited to do his bidding. Triumph had attended him on the battlefield; his kingdom had expanded and was enjoying a new height of prosperity. Yet, in all this victory and exaltation, there lurked subtle temptations which he neglected to guard against.

It was in the midst of this outward prosperity, yet decline of inward piety, that David committed the dreadful crimes against God and man recorded in II Samuel 11:1-27, that being his illicit relationship with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband Uriah. The fallen human nature—how weak and prone to sin it is! How it will blindly lead those under its power to commit acts which in more sober thought would be shunned and despised. Thus it was with David, a man greatly beloved and honored by God, but yet he fell.

Thanks be to God there is such a thing as repentance and remission of sins. God sent the prophet Nathan to reveal to David his great transgressions and to reprove him, as recorded in II Samuel 12:1-12. Now realizing his guilt, there were but two courses before the king. One was repentance, confession, and reformation; the other, to denounce the prophet and use his royal power to punish one who presumed to reprove a king. The deep-rooted nobility of David prevailed, and with anguish of heart, he said, "I have sinned against the Lord."—vs. 13

In this victory over his own pride and selfishness, David proved himself a greater hero than in all his previous victories and exploits in battle. In Psalm 51:1-17, David makes public confession of his sin, and of God's great mercy and forgiveness. By his

words he exhorts all sinners to pray to God promptly for divine forgiveness, before their hearts become set in an evil course.

David's course is to be commended to all who have to any degree departed from the ways of the Lord. Furthermore, it is an example of how God will both mercifully educate and, in his kingdom, forgive all mankind who come to know and love his righteous laws. Of this time the prophet wrote, "And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."—Jer. 31:34

ADULTERY—JESUS' TESTIMONY

The decree, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," is one of the Ten Commandments of God's law as given to the people of Israel. (Exod. 20:14) In its most basic form, it prohibits defilement of the marriage contract between a man and a woman. Adultery was punishable by death. (Deut. 22:22) In the Old Testament, adulterers are also grouped together with murderers, treacherous men, sorcerers, false swearers, and those who oppress others.—Job 24:14,15; Jer. 9:2; Mal. 3:5

Our further attention is drawn to Jesus' words on this subject: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for

it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.”—Matt. 5:27-29

The word hell that occurs in this passage is translated from the Greek *Gehenna*, which is a rendition of the Hebrew words for the “Valley of Hinnom.” This valley lay just outside Jerusalem and was used to burn garbage and other unwanted refuse. Fires were kept burning continually, and if the need arose, brimstone, or sulfur, was added to assist combustion. However, no living thing was ever permitted to be cast into *Gehenna*, and under Jewish law no creature was permitted to be tortured. (Jer. 7:30,31) Thus, it is symbolic of eternal death—nonexistence—but not torture. It was not until the Dark Ages that the unscriptural idea that *Gehenna* was a place of eternal torment crept into religious teachings.

In the foregoing passage Jesus teaches us by way of illustration that it is better to give up one of the members of our bodies than to lose life eternally. The lesson is one of self-control. It is more profitable for us to refuse to gratify the desires of the flesh—although these at times may seem to be as near and dear to us as our “right eye”—than to allow ourselves to be overcome and to lose the promise that has been offered Christians of a place in the heavenly phase of God’s kingdom.

During the earthly phase of God’s kingdom, divine laws will be enforced, but at that time assistance will be given to the people to enable them to attain perfection. Then it will be essential not only that all conform in outward appearance to the commandments but that the spirit and heart

condition also be in harmony with God. Our Lord will look into the heart of the individual and will judge accordingly.

THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

In I Corinthians chapter 5, the Apostle Paul addresses a situation involving immorality which he had learned existed in the church at Corinth. "Your glorying is not good," he wrote, indicating that perhaps the Corinthian brethren took pride in their false sense of brotherly love which was causing them to tolerate such a condition.—vs. 6

In the case of one offender in particular who had been called to Paul's attention, the apostle directed that the church should put him out from their fellowship, as he put it, "for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (vs. 5) Paul spoke of this action as the purging out of "leaven" from their midst. Leaven in the Scriptures is always used as a symbol of sin in one form or another, never as a pure and wholesome influence.

That immorality should have existed at that time in a Christian congregation might seem strange, but not so much when we take into consideration the former habits of some in Corinth who had accepted Christ and attached themselves to his people. The Grecians in Corinth were predominantly heathen worshippers. Venus was a widely revered goddess. One historian has written, "The worship of Venus here was attended with shameful licentiousness."

The Mosaic Law was unique in its delineation of moral standards, and the Jewish people's adherence

to these set them apart from the gentiles around them. Practices such as those defined by the Law as immoral had formerly been a part of the idolatrous worship of many of the new converts. Thus, amongst those in the church at Corinth, immorality was perhaps not viewed with the same degree of repugnance as it would otherwise have been had the practices been less common in society at large. However, such things were contrary to the will of God, and, as noted in the account, Paul took strong action to correct the disorder.

Nevertheless, this inflexible stand taken by Paul against wrong was done in love. He reveals this in his second letter to the same church. (II Cor. 2:1-11) Paul was planning to visit these brethren, and he wanted nothing to mar the joy of the occasion. He commended the church for taking the action against the wrongdoer which he had urged. Furthermore, he considered that now the brother had learned his lesson, and to avoid overburdening him with too much sorrow, he now counseled the church that he be forgiven and returned to their fellowship. If they took this action, Paul explained, he would join them in it, believing that this also was the attitude which would be taken by Christ. Thus we see not only that Paul wanted wrongdoing to be corrected, but also the wrongdoer restored to favor and fellowship among the brethren and with the Lord.

ETERNAL LESSONS FOR ALL

During the present age, faithful Christians have dedicated their lives to following after Jesus by presenting their bodies as a living sacrifice which has been acceptable to the Heavenly Father. (Rom. 12:1)

These have been called from every nation of earth to be the elect members of the heavenly bride class.

Those who respond to this heavenly invitation are justified, or made right, in God's sight. (Rom. 3:22-24; 5:8-11) They are alert, not only regarding the basic moral precepts of righteousness, but of even greater importance, to cleanse themselves from secret faults of the mind and the heart. Realizing the necessity to guard against these beginnings of sin and to keep themselves in a cleansed and pure condition, they will go in prayer to the fountain of grace often to seek help in every time of need.

The sanctity of the marriage relationship is emphasized by the fact that the Lord uses it as an illustration of the oneness of Christ and the church, his "bride." Paul presents a wonderful lesson along this line, and in conclusion, says, "This [the marriage relationship] is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church."—Eph. 5:22-32

In keeping with this illustration, the apostle wrote to the Corinthian church, saying, "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." (II Cor. 11:2) Christians who are faithful to Christ—even unto death—will be united with him in heavenly glory when the "marriage of the Lamb" takes place.—Rev. 2:10; 19:7

Paul also exhorted the church, saying, "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body." (I Cor. 6:19,20) The temple symbolism is used in the New Testament in two ways. One of them is in the above Scripture,

in which Paul refers to the fleshly body of each believer as a “temple,” the symbolic dwelling place of God through his Holy Spirit. It is God’s Spirit which assists the Christian in attaining, and maintaining, purity of heart, thought, word and action.—Rom. 8:11-13

The other “temple” picture used in the New Testament is presented by the Apostle Peter. He wrote, “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood.” (I Pet. 2:5) Here each footstep follower of Jesus is spoken of, not as a temple, but as a stone being prepared to be a part of a spiritual “house,” or temple, of the future, a “habitation of God.” (Heb. 3:6; Eph. 2:19,22) Similarly, John the Revelator wrote, “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God.”—Rev. 3:12

This is in keeping with the teachings of the Bible that Christ and his church together, as the “seed” of Abraham, will be the channel through which God’s promised blessings will ultimately reach out to “all the families of the earth” during the thousand years of the Messianic kingdom.—Gal. 3:8,16,27-29; Rev. 20:6

In that kingdom of righteousness, all mankind will have had the opportunity to learn the needed lessons related to all aspects of sin and its disastrous results. Of that time, the prophet says, “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” (Isa. 11:9) Indeed, this is the “good and acceptable” purpose of “God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”—I Tim. 2:3,4, *New American Standard Bible* ■