

Excerpt from Lecture XIII

on

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18: "Do Not Be Overly Righteous"

by

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"I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness. Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all." (Ecclesiastes 7:15-18)

Solomon specifies one of his observations and founds upon it the counsel of wisdom: "There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness." The subject here, I apprehend, is not the conduct of Divine providence respecting the fortunes and lives of the righteous and the wicked, but rather the treatment which these two frequently experience from the world (though this, no doubt, takes place under the superintendence and by the permission of Heaven).

Solomon had noted various instances in which the consistently righteous man (the man who by his conduct "testifies against the world that its deeds are evil") had exposed himself to the malignancy of hatred and envy, and by which his days had been at once embittered and cut short through open violence or by secret treachery; while at the same time the wicked man had "prolonged his life in his wickedness" by acting on principles more congenial to the liking of the world in which he lived, and by employing arts for his preservation such as the just man could not in conscience have recourse to. Thus the wicked man sometimes had even succeeded in lengthening out his days *by* his wickedness while the good man had prematurely perished *for* his righteousness.

With this general observation, what follows is to be considered in immediate connection: "Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all."

Persons who do not relish or study the word of God as a whole often have particular parts of it which they like--favorite texts that, when severed from their context, appear to suit their preconceived opinions and prevalent desires. These little insulated scraps of Scripture--misunderstood and perverted, and applied to purposes the very opposite of the Divine intention--are widely circulated and accepted among multitudes of people, many of whom perhaps never

read them in their Bibles but instead have gotten them secondhand as maxims of high authority. These are quoted on all occasions and referred to with the easy confidence of a geometrician quoting his axioms. In this and many other ways the word of God meets with treatment which would be resented as an insult by any human author, being made to express sentiments in perfect contradiction to its general spirit and even to its most explicit declarations.

Few texts (perhaps I might say none) have ever been in such general favor and appealed to with approbation as the first clause of the sixteenth verse, "be not righteous overmuch." Its grand recommendation lies in its being so *undefined*, susceptible of so many shades of meaning, prescribing no precise boundaries but leaving matters conveniently at large, and thus affording latitude for every man to fix his own standard. It is surprising how men who hate and disregard the Bible in its great truths and requirements will yet quote its words--even plead for its authority!--when by means of any perversion it can be made to accord with their own inclinations.

The saying is a favorite one with the profligate, who in cursing the enthusiasm and hypocrisy of others vainly fancies that he is vindicating his own vice and folly. He rejects with scorn serious and salutary advice, reckoning it quite a sufficient reason that it comes from one whom all must concede to be "overly righteous."

On the other hand it is appealed to by the man of morality, who with stern severity condemns the profligate, but who prides himself on his own sobriety, honesty, industry, kindness, and general decency of character. Making this external virtue his religion, though without a single sentiment or emotion of inward godliness, he considers everything beyond it as being "overly righteous."

Many who are equally destitute of the true spirit of religion, who feel its services an irksome drudgery and satisfy their consciences with very flimsy apologies for the neglect of them, are every ready to pronounce those who cannot see their excuses in the same satisfactory light with themselves as "overly righteous."

This admonition is also a weapon in constant use with the thousands whose religion consists in the strict observance of its outward forms. They would not for the world be missed out of their pew on a Sunday, and with even greater reluctance on certain days of human institution. They clearly are for keeping religion to its proper place. This is a topic on which they continually insist, a species of *propriety* which, accompanied with a smile of self satisfaction, is forever on their lips. All is well if a man minds religion on its own appropriate day and attends to his business the rest of the week. These things must not be made to clash. "Six days shalt thou labor, and one thou shalt rest," are God's own prescriptions. And the Bible itself enjoins us not to be "overly righteous."

But there are none to whom this favorite caution is of more essential service than those professors of religion who, disliking "the offense of the cross," are desirous to keep on good terms with both Christ and the world. They hide from others, and try to hide from themselves, the real principle of their conduct by prudential maxims of imposing plausibility, and some of them in the terms of Scripture. The wisdom of the serpent, they say, is recommended to us as well as the harmlessness of the dove. They cannot see the use of exposing themselves and their religion to

needless derision. They are ever mightily afraid lest, by the over strictness and unyielding spirit of its professors, men should be led to form gloomy notions of the gospel as being a system of morose and puritanical austerity. Under the pretext of recommending religion, such persons meet the world halfway. They join in its follies and vain amusements. They court rather than shun its intercourse. They sanction their unseemly compliance by an appeal to the admonition before us, regarding the reproach cast upon others (who think a more decided and marked separation from the world their duty) as brought upon themselves by their own imprudence, by *carrying matters too far*, by being "overly righteous."

It is of great importance to rightly understand a passage of Scripture that has been so much abused, and of which the abuse is so extensively prejudicial. Before noticing any of the different views that have been taken of it, I shall state what appears to me its true meaning.

The whole passage seems to be an instance of serious and impressive irony, of which the subject is the line of conduct most prudent to be pursued, **supposing the end in view to be the securing of favor, honor, and prosperity in the world.** Thus:

[1] "There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness." If, therefore, you wish to avoid the enmity of the world with its mischievous and sometimes deadly consequences, and to insure favor, success, honor, and long life, "be not overly righteous." Remember that religion is a matter in which men, in general, are particularly fond of moderation; and beware of assuming an appearance of sanctity greater than the world is disposed to approve of or bear with.

[2] "Neither make yourself overly wise; why should you destroy yourself?" Recollect that the same feelings of envy and malignant jealousy may be excited by high degrees of superior intelligence and wisdom. Be not obtrusive, therefore, with your eminent endowments. Deal prudently. Be cautious of exasperating the jealous pride of others. Besides the risks that arise from envy, such qualities may bring you often into the critical situation of an arbitrator, in which you must unavoidably expose yourself to the resentment of one or other of the parties, and possibly even of both. And from various other sources, danger may arise to you.

But at the same time beware, for similar effects may be produced by opposite causes. Although men do not like overly religious people, still you must be on your guard against the extreme of wickedness.

[3] "Be not overly wicked." You will expose yourself to suspicion and hatred as a dangerous member of society. Men will become your enemies from fear, and will think they confer a benefit on the community by getting rid of you. Nay, in the excess of riotous and unbridled profligacy, you may be betrayed into deeds which may awaken the vengeance of human laws and bring you to an untimely end. Let prudent consideration, then, set bounds to your licentiousness.

[4] "Neither be foolish; why should you die before your time?" As there are hazards attending high pretensions to wisdom, so are there risks peculiar to folly. The absolute

fool becomes the object of contempt. He is easily made the tool and the dupe of a party, exposing himself to be the prey of virulent enemies or of selfish pretended friends. Folly leads a man into innumerable scrapes. It may induce him heedlessly to mix with wicked associates, and may thus occasion his suffering for crimes of which he had no active hand in the perpetration, and which he himself would shrink from committing. And in numberless ways he may, by his folly, come to "die before his time."

If, therefore, your object is to shun the world's enmity with its possible and probable effects, and to secure the world's favor with its desirable accompaniments and consequences, then take care of these extremes: as "there is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, be not overly righteous, neither make yourself overly wise; why should you destroy yourself?" And though "a wicked man" may and sometimes does "prolong his life in his wickedness," yet "be not overly wicked, neither be foolish; why should you die before your time?"

All Scripture irony is serious and intended to impress on the mind important lessons. The passage in this respect is similar to that striking one towards the close of the book: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; BUT KNOW that for all these God will bring you into judgment" (11:9). So here also in chapter 7 the admonition closes with an impressive recommendation of the fear of the Lord as the best and only means of inspiring true peace and tranquil security of mind. It is a sovereign antidote against the fear of man and a powerful incentive to the faithful and firm discharge of duty in every situation: "It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for HE WHO FEARS GOD WILL ESCAPE THEM ALL" (v. 18).

Instead of adopting any of the maxims of the world or following any of the schemes of a carnal policy, we should "be in the fear of the LORD all the day long" (Prov. 23:17).

In the vindication of the general principle which I have adopted for the explanation of this passage, let it now be observed, in the first place, that the motives which Solomon employs to recommend and enforce his advice evidently show that in the fifteenth verse (when he speaks of "a righteous man perishing in his righteousness and a wicked man prolonging his life in his wickedness,") he refers not directly to the conduct of providence but to the consequences arising to the righteous and the wicked from the feelings of mankind towards them; for in the ordinary administration of God, the duration of human life does not appear to be at all regulated by the characters of men.

Secondly, if the counsel "be not overly righteous" means that it is our duty to be righteous but that we should beware of excess in righteousness, then the opposite counsel "be not overly wicked," if taken seriously (that is, as having nothing in it of the nature of irony), must on the same principle of interpretation be understood to signify that we may be wicked provided we take due care not to exceed or go beyond bounds in our wickedness. But this surely can never be the counsel of the word of God.

Thirdly, *righteousness*, when opposed as it is here to *wickedness*, usually means in Scripture language true religion in general, in all its various branches, of principle and practice--the entire profession and course of conduct of a good man. In this enlarged sense I understand it here, and

this makes me dissatisfied with other interpretations of the passage.

Some consider righteousness as referring particularly to the exercise of justice, and the admonition not to be overly righteous as a caution against the over-rigid application of the principles of equity--pressing everything to an extreme, never tempering justice with clemency but exacting satisfaction and punishment without mercy on all occasions, even for the most trivial faults. But if righteousness means simply justice, then wickedness must mean simply injustice. And if "be not overly righteous" be a warning against the extreme of justice, "be not overly wicked" must be a warning against the extreme of injustice, a warning which we certainly should not expect to find in the Bible, which admits of no compromise between right and wrong, whose sentence is, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10). Those who have adopted this interpretation have not sufficiently attended to the *antithesis* in the passage, nor duly considered that the true principle of interpretation--whatever it may be--ought to apply with equal fairness and ease to both sides of it.

Others who understand the terms "righteous" and "wicked" in their more general acceptation (just as I think they ought to be understood) but who yet at the same time conceive "be not overly righteous" to be Solomon's serious counsel, cannot deny that of true righteousness, of real religion, of genuine unsophisticated goodness there cannot be excess. They are therefore under the necessity of qualifying and restricting the terms after all. Some explain the words as a caution against *intemperate zeal* exerting itself indiscreetly, contentiously, and to the injury of religion. Others explain them as a warning against a *blind and bigoted superstition*, displaying itself in an excessive attachment to rites and ceremonies of human invention, or even to external institutions of Divine appointment, while the spirit of vital godliness is entirely or in a great measure overlooked. And still others explain them as an admonition against a *needless scrupulosity* about trifles, a lack of proper discrimination between smaller and greater matters, between what have been termed essentials and non-essentials, from which have arisen the hottest contentions and numberless unnecessary schisms.

Of all these interpretation it may be observed in general: First, that these things are not properly "righteousness" but the mere adjuncts and unjustifiable accompaniments or counterfeits of righteousness. And secondly, that if such things are meant in the exhortation "be not overly righteous," it will follow that what is said in the verse preceding ("the righteous man perishing in his righteousness") must be considered as expressing not the consequence of his real godliness itself, but of his imprudent profession and practice or his needlessly ostentatious display of it. But this certainly is not what Solomon means when he contrasts the "righteous perishing in his righteousness" and the "wicked prolonging his life in his wickedness."

Considering righteousness, then, in its proper sense (the sense in which it is generally used in the Bible), I must repeat that no man who is conversant in the contents of that blessed volume can for a moment admit the idea of its containing a caution against the excess of true religion and moral obedience. Were such excess possible, surely it is not the side on which we are in danger of erring and of which we require to be seriously admonished. Shall we warn a man against too much spirituality of mind who feels himself by nature "carnal, sold under sin," and in whose bosom the "law of sin" is incessantly striving against the "law of his mind?" Shall we put him on his guard against allowing the love of God--the comprehensive principle of all

righteousness--to occupy too much of his heart, a man whose nature is enmity against Him? How preposterous the thought of warning a sinful creature against the excess of holiness, a selfish man against the excess of benevolence and integrity, an earthly-minded man against too intimate a fellowship with heaven, a man surrounded with temptations to equivocate between God and the world, a man who has so many prevailing tendencies toward the entire dereliction of righteousness against being "overly righteous!"

In describing the character at which God's people ought continually to aim, the whole of the language of the Divine word is fitted to impress on every mind the *impossibility* of the dreaded excess of being "overly righteous." Let a few passages suffice as a specimen of many. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

These passages are only a sample of those found in the Bible on the subject of Christian holiness. They express a spirituality, a decision and self-denial, perseverance, and progress of practical obedience utterly inconsistent with any cautions against the danger of excess and admonitions to moderation. The sinless perfection of our mortal nature is the goal of commanded pursuit and promised attainment. We can never, even in a future world, go beyond this; and in the present world, bearing about with us the corruption of the old man to the end, we can never reach it. We can never exceed the requirements of the precepts I have been repeating. To be "overly righteous" is an impossibility.

Excerpt from "Lecture XIII" in *Lectures on the Book of Ecclesiastes* by Ralph Wardlaw (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1822). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except for some condensation and light editing for clarity. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, long paragraphs have been divided, and the NKJV has been used for most quotations.