

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:5-8.

Topic: What is Righteousness?

Text: Jeremiah 23:6c -- "The Lord is our Righteousness."

Proposition: Righteousness consists of the attitudes **one** holds and the things one does because he loves God with all his heart and in faith seeks to do God's will both in his personal life and in his relations with others.

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 July 10, 1966 - Alamosa + Blanca, Colo.

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Introduction:

1. The public is still confused over the issues brought out by the TV quiz scandals. Most people seem to agree that it is wrong to do the things that the producers and some of the contestants did as they rigged the shows. Some people, however, do not seem to see anything wrong in it at all. Most folks of both groups do agree that it was wrong for the persons involved to ~~lie~~ about the matter, as some did in the original grand jury investigations.

2. How can ~~we~~ ^{we} tell if a course of conduct is right or wrong? On what basis can you or I choose a thing and feel assured that it is a good and right thing to do?

3. We say that a custom like monogamy is right, but when we come in contact with and ~~understanding of~~ ^{understanding of} peoples who practice polygyny can we ~~condemn~~ ^{condemn} them as being wrong? We are not to judge others, we are taught, and yet we must have some uniform standards by which to live. What are to be our standards?

4. In a christian service of worship

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such as this, there is only one standard, one ethic, that we can use as our guide in matters of right and wrong. That standard is the christian one, set down by Jesus. As christians, we believe this to be the best and highest standard in the world. We are seeking today to understand of what christian righteousness consists, as shown and taught by Christ, as applied to daily problems such as judgment of a TV show.

5. The Scripture which we read, Jeremiah 23:5-8, is the traditional Scripture of some liturgical Protestant churches for this last Sunday in the traditional christian year. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the christian year, and of the season celebrating the birth of Christ. This traditional Scripture is in a passage in which disaster is predicted for those who oppose and oppress the people of Israel. However, the end is not yet, says the writer, for God will raise up in the house of David one who will reign wisely and with justice and righteousness. This savior will be called by a name which means "The Lord is our righteousness."

6. As christians we believe that the

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savior predicted by the writer of Jeremiah was Jesus. For Jesus, the Lord was his righteousness. For Christians the Lord, as revealed by Christ, has always been their righteousness. In seeking Jesus' standards on moral matters today we use liberally the help of Chapters III and V of Georgia Harkness' book "Christian Ethics."

I. Righteousness as taught by Jesus.

1. Jesus taught an ethic, a way of life completely integrated with his religion. He taught love of others as an absolute and natural outcome of his first teaching about the love of God. It was the feeling that he was called by God that caused him at the beginning of his ministry to read in the synagogue the words of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach
good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to
the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the
Lord."(Lk.4:18-19; Isa.61:1-2).

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Were Jesus' "good news to the poor," "release of the captive," "recovery of sight to the blind," acts of righteousness or religion? They were both. He did good to people because God wanted him to.

2. As much as he practiced and taught doing good for others, he laid primary stress on **ethical** and **spiritual** inwardness. This is not to say that he was indifferent to outward acts, or to the way people conducted themselves toward one another. On the contrary, his most stinging words are directed toward those "who preach but do not practice;" to those who "bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger"; to those who "devour widows houses and for a pretense ... make long prayers"; to those who are "blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (Mt. 23:3,4,14,23). Yet, many passages of the New Testament indicate that his chief concern was with right attitudes from which right acts might proceed.

3. Jesus set a clear pattern of the demands of the God-centered life. By clear pattern is not meant a blue print or easily

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applicable set of rules. But one who reads the Gospels seriously is left in no doubt as to the general structure of what a life lived in obedient love of God would be like. The primary qualities are a God-centered faith and love. Coming from this are purity of heart, sincerity, humility, forgiveness, love toward enemies, mercy, charity in judgment, honesty in speech and action, sexual purity, the preference of spiritual to material aims in life, compassion toward those in need. The good life is that of generous and self-giving service to all men, and unbroken, unworried trust in the goodness of God.

One's reaction to this list may quite reasonably be that there is nothing unique about them, for they are advocated in Judaism and some other non-Christian religions as well as in Greek philosophy and the modern secular world. Or one may dismiss them as admirable but unobtainable and of doubtful value even if they could be attained.

But Jesus did not set out to give a catalog of virtues. His concern was to proclaim the nature of a God-centered, love-filled life in obedience to the call of God, and to win men to it.

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4. Jesus had a realistic knowledge of sin and of the possibilities of the redeemed life. Unlike Paul and many churchmen since, he did NOT teach that man is totally depraved and bad. Neither did he set forth a doctrine that man is naturally good if given ~~a~~ half a chance, as is characteristic of Greek thought and present-day humanism. Because "he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25) he pierced through the veneer of "good" people to their trickery and self-deception, and saw that the keeping of the commandments from ones youth up was no substitute for single-minded devotion to God (Mark 10:17-22). Yet on the other hand he never scaled downward man's possibilities, and the very virtues he showed as belonging to the life of faith and love are witness to his confidence that man with the help of God could live as the "salt of the earth."

Jesus gives no explicit doctrine of sin; what he does do is show us what is wrong with our living and what the good life, centered in obedience to God's will, might be. He gives no explicit doctrine of redemption, how man can turn from sin to God. His primary approach was a positive setting forth of the way in which men's

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sins could be overcome. The Gospel of John caught perfectly the dominant mood and method of Jesus when he wrote, "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:17).

What are the requirements for turning from sin? Jesus' teaching and ministry show us. God forgives, in infinite love and mercy, the sinner who turns to him, as taught by the parable of the prodigal son. The primary focus is on God's act. But the sinner himself must also do something about it: commit his will to turning from sin and seek God, repent of his wrongs, forgive others, and have faith in God -- "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Lk 7:50).

5. Jesus declared the supreme worth of every person to God. Because God loved each and every person so did Jesus. Therefore he gave himself to a ministry of helpfulness to all. Although democracy has some roots in the Greek cities and other areas, ~~Jesus and his followers for~~ the chief background of democracy is this concern of Jesus and his followers for the worth of each person and all persons. His democracy was rooted in his

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relationship to God.

6. The central teaching of Jesus was the Kingdom of God. Opinions differ greatly about what this Kingdom is. However, most would agree that the Kingdom of God is made up of people who accept God's rule and try to live in obedience to his will, in faith and in love. Jesus does not speak of reconstructing social institutions, like forming a new economic system, new government or new church. But he has much to say about the attitudes and motives of men in their life together. The kingdom established because men live with God-loving respect for others is the "pearl of great price." He who enters God's Kingdom is not the self-righteous moralist, trusting in his own virtue and his fidelity to the law; it is one who receives it with the humble trustfulness of a child (Mk. 10:15). The Kingdom is present among the poor in spirit and among repentant sinners.

7. God controls both this life and the life to come. As one enters the Kingdom now, as one responds in faith and love to God's rule with deeds of service, he comes closer to the eternal life. This

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Life, indeed, becomes a school for the next one.

8. Jesus did not say much specifically on how to apply his principles. In many areas of life any one of the possible courses of actions is less than ideal. Jesus never did talk, as we sometimes do, of choosing "the lesser of two evils." There was no compromise for him. Sin must be eradicated, eye, hand and foot (Mt. 5: 29-30; 18:8-9; Mk.9:43-48). He never practiced compromise, and went to his death rather than sacrifice a principle. When the ideal is impossible because we don't know what it is, there still is a christian choice which is a positive one. "To do what appears as relatively best is an absolute duty before God," said the Oxford Conference report on "The Universal Church and the World of Nations." This is the message of Jesus, in a doubtful situation to choose the greater good. When you choose between sins you take the world's evil as your base line, but when you choose the greater good you take God's goodness as shown by Jesus as your guide.

9. Circumstances change, and with them courses of action. God does not change,

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nor the type of obedient faith-filled love which Jesus embodied and proclaimed. He does not, therefore, leave us unguided at the concrete decisions of life. How his principles, some of which we have been considering, give guidance in this world as to what is right or wrong is now our goal.

II. A christian solution to some current problems of right and wrong is the way we are going to try to illustrate Jesus' answer, and the christian answer, to the question "What is Righteousness?" Our first concern is the question

1. Is it ever right for a christian to kill his fellow man? If we think about war, the only way a christian can conclude that its killing is justified is because of his love for the persons protected by the war; and he must strive to fight without hatred toward any, and with real concern for what war does to people. It is always unchristian to kill wantonly, or without deep soul-searching leading to the conclusion that love requires it as the will of God. Some christians do sincerely arrive at the conclusion that some wars, some executions, some protectiv

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killings, are justified. Other just-as-sincere christians can have no part of killing. It is a dilemma. Our church stands behind the sincere decision of its member, whichever way he decides. The important thing is that his love for God makes God's concern for people his chief consideration in his decision about killing.

This problem of killing is tied up with related matters, such as safe automobile driving, active help in disease prevention and cure, support of movements to stamp out starvation, etc.. Life is sacred, and not to do ones most as a christian to protect it is to help kill.

2. Another question of right or wrong is this: ought a christian ever to lie, steal or cheat? To a point-blank question like this most everybody would answer "No!" But "extenuating circumstances" come up, and then christians, like others, sometime yield to temptation. One will not rob a bank, but he will conveniently forget to report some ~~tax~~ things when he pays his income tax, if he thinks he will not be caught. For many of us there are 2 principles which guide us in our society: (1) one does "what other people do," and

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(2) one does "what you can get away with." Small lies, told to keep a social situation smooth or to help ones self out of a predicament, seem all right, until one realizes he is becoming an extensive liar. Cheating on an examination may be wrong in general, but there always seems a reason for doing it "this time." One's grade is too critical, or a friend needs help. Any one of us knows of lots of instances in which so-called christian principles are violated "Just a little bit," or "just this once."

There is no blue print in the New Testament to tell us precisely what to do in every one of the many instances where we are confronted with the temptation to deceive others or to possess that which is not ours. Admittedly, life comes with mixed issues, and to contend that one must always tell the truth, even if in a time of war or tyrannical oppression it costs another person his life, is "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel." Yet both Jesus and the prophets before him are clear in their convictions that any exploiting and callous dishonesty, by whatever name it is called, is wrong in the eyes of God. So strong is the impulse

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to acquisitiveness and to self-love that most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, will admit that only by the grace of God can we be honest with other men in those areas of life where only God's eyes see us.

3. Let us turn to one other general area of conduct, and ask how a christian acts when he is tempted by what may be called "sins of the flesh?" The medieval church listed the seven deadly sins as pride, anger, envy, avarice, sloth, gluttony, and lust. The first five are sins of disposition and attitude, not of the flesh. ~~xxx~~ If attitudes are christian the sins of the flesh will be at a minimum

Gluttony, one of these sins of the flesh, is not simply overeating, though that certainly is part of it. Its most serious expression is the drinking of alcoholic beverages. Is it ever right for a christian to drink? Some sincere christians say it is possible to drink and be christian. The position of our own church is that it is less dangerous and more christian not to drink. Why?

First, because though nobody starts out to be a drunkard, there is no guaran-

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tee against it. About one out of every 10 who drink becomes a problem drinker, a drunkard, an alcoholic, a menace to himself, his family and society. If one never drinks he certainly never will be an alcoholic. Besides, even if he can control it and be a true moderate drinker, it's expensive and at the best does no real good.

Secondly, the christian will want to think of the effects of his drinking on others. If he influences one person to drink who cannot control it and becomes an alcoholic, he has done wrong, has sinned.

Thirdly, the christian respects his body as God's temple, thinks of his money as held in stewardship ~~for~~ God's constructive uses, keeps his mind clear and vigorous for God's service, and in his spirit and social contacts finds ~~active expression with~~ relaxation and warm fellowship that is sincere and does not need the artificial stimulation of alcohol.

The christian does not condemn him who differs with him on this, but neither does he surrender his view just because the pressure is on and "everybody's doing it."

On the second sin of the flesh, lust, it is enough to say that sex, unlike alcohol, is a good gift of God, and a necessary one.

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Lust is the debasing and sinful use of sex, for it uses what is intended for good and perverts it to selfish and sensual indulgence; for ones own gratification using another without love or respect for that person. For a christian, the guideline here, again, is conduct based on a real and sincere concern for the welfare and good of others. ~~Thus~~

Conclusion:

1. We have looked at Jesus' example and teachings in the field of ethics, or morals, or as to what is right or wrong. Although we found that he did not deal with a lot of details which might help specifically today, he did give basic and guiding principles.

2. These were that:

a. ones religion must find expression in ones daily life;

b. the inward spiritual life is the source of all real good one does or says

c. the list of virtues which can be compiled from his teachings are those common to good men everywhere;

d. by himself man can not live good and virtuous life, so he sins;

e. ~~but~~ he needs God, who constantly

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offers his forgiveness; for which, in gratitude he loves God,

f. Every person is important in the sight of God and in his love of God a Christian seeks to serve and help these children of God;

g. ^{As} One succeeds in living by faith in this spirit of love and faith, he gradually becomes a citizen of God's kingdom, which is both now and eternal.

h. Compromise with evil is always to be avoided and the greater good always chosen, which in dealing with others means to choose that which does them the greatest good.

3. These principles of Jesus led us to state on ^{some} matters of every day practical concern that

a. killing generally is wrong, and always is wrong if done in hate;

b. Lying, cheating, and stealing are almost always wrong, for usually they hurt ~~del~~ and others;

c. Gluttony in food or drink hurts personality and others and is unchristian

d. lust is misuse of the sex drive and is always wrong.

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4. We did not exhaust either the principles of Jesus or the list of right or wrong. We do seem to have gone deep and far enough to be able as christians to answer our question, "What is righteousness," thus

5. Righteousness consists of the attitudes one holds and actions one does because he loves God with all his heart and in faith seeks to do God's will -- in his personal life and in his relations with others. This is the Jesus way. This is righteousness.

6. Jeremiah was on the right track, when centuries before Christ he said, "The Lord is our Righteousness."

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