

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Judgment: Human and Divine

Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God. (Ecclesiastes 8:11-13)

Criminologists may vary widely in their assessments and explanations, but few would disagree that our country's penal system has hopelessly failed in its professed task of "rehabilitating" criminals, or for that matter of even discouraging them from repeating their criminal activity. I am inclined to question the validity of the idea that prison rehabilitates hardened criminals. Humans cannot fully know what is in the heart of another human, but we may safely conclude that putting a hardened criminal in the same facility as a person who commits a single crime and shows genuine remorse for his deed will not improve the moral character of the fellow who committed a single crime. It will more likely further corrupt him than rehabilitate him. Perhaps our culture should seek out ways to distinguish between the hardened criminal who will, short of divine intervention, not be rehabilitated and the "one-time offender." Incarcerate the one to protect society from his evil deeds, and use effective rehabilitative activities with the other.

Aside from an interesting and quite pertinent philosophical discussion regarding our nation's penal system, Solomon reminds us of one fact that transcends personal philosophy. Proof of guilt or innocence should be thorough, but once guilt has been determined, the sentence should be executed speedily. The longer delayed the sentence the more fully the criminal thinks he has escaped the consequences of his crime. Sadly, in our country's penal system the criminal is correct in his thinking. Often it would seem that the funds a man has to spend on an attorney has more to do with the outcome of his trial than the facts of his guilt or innocence.

The principle of a speedy administration of justice, of imposing on the wrong-doer the consequences of his wrongs, lies at the heart of Solomon's lesson. This principle not only applies to criminal conduct against society, but it equally applies to individuals and our interpersonal relationships. When people ignore reality (or in our increasingly post-Christian culture create their own fantasy "reality"), we do them no favors to assist their self-delusional attitude that they have done no wrong, and thus have no consequences to face.

There is a place for patience and longsuffering in the Christian worldview, but the role of these neglected virtues does not conflict with Solomon's principle of speedily bringing the consequences of a person's actions to bear upon his mind and liberty. Whether in the case of a criminal, a child in a loving home, or a brother or sister in a Bible believing Christian church, failure to live within the defined moral and ethical limits of God's Word reinforces a person's sinful inclinations.

"Dr. Phil" in his daily television show typically deals with families in once crisis or another. He consistently reminds people that they reap the harvest of what they sowed, that their unhappy and failed relationships resulted from their own failures. He rather forcefully insists that people focus on their own faults, not blame others for their unhappiness and failures. In the case of children whose conduct has run out of control Dr. Phil often observes that the parents of these children adopted a faulty perspective of parenting. Quite frequently one of these parents will say, "I don't want to be a 'parent' to my child, I want to be his best friend." Dr. Phil will rebuke this populist attitude with "Your child needs a parent who

has the courage to set boundaries and be a parent, not a parent who abandons that role.” During an era in public education when the “open classroom” (the idea that you merely put information in the child’s environment, but never impose structure and enforced homework and order onto the child) was in vogue, but obviously failing miserably, I was privileged to hear a leading educator make his case against this failed philosophy. In clear terms he said, “I gladly give children open choices. Do you want to do math this morning or this afternoon? But I will make doubly sure that their math has been done before the end of the school day!” Children, citizens, employees, and church members alike prefer a culture with clearly set boundaries and definitions of acceptable—and unacceptable—conduct. The only way any cultural unit can possibly fulfill this need is to first clearly state and define such conduct. However, a defined acceptable conduct that is not enforced is as futile and “fuzzy” as the “open” culture that never says anything about its expectations.

Solomon reminds us clearly that, while human justice—or human expectations of personal conduct within moral, ethical, and acceptable limits—often fails, divine justice—and personal divine expectations—never fail. From our brief perspective, it may appear that the sinner is prospering in his sin, and the saint is suffering in his righteousness, Solomon anchors his thoughts, and ours, with a firm conviction, “...surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him.” In Scripture fearing God has almost nothing to do with the emotion of fear and everything to do with conduct that honors the one feared. If we fear God, we will order our lives according to His commandments and not according to our personal appetites and whims.

Solomon injects an obvious tension into the passage. In one sentence he states that the sinner’s days are “prolonged” in his sinful course, and in the very next sentence he says that the sinner cannot “prolong his days, which are as a shadow.” Make a note; anytime you see such an obvious tension point, often in the form of an apparent contradiction (apparent only, not a real contradiction), stop and examine the lesson closely. This tension point aims to get our attention and to challenge us to probe

deeper into the matter to understand something important.

It doesn’t take a lot of thought to conclude that Solomon in this passage is reminding us that the appearances of this life are not the final chapter in divine justice and judgment. Some sinners may well live and prosper throughout a long life (Job 21:7-15 makes this point in significant detail.), but their long life is amazingly brief compared with the “time” that they shall face in divine judgment after their death. Regardless of the time delay, death is certain, and divine justice/judgment is equally certain.

D. A. Carson offers an instructive assessment of these verses.

“8:12–13 The answer of faith. The wicked person’s sin might be great (*a hundred crimes*) and his life long, but the viewpoint of faith says *I know*. (The *I saw* of v 9 puts forward what all can see; the *I know* of v 12 is a viewpoint not appreciated by everyone.) From one angle the wicked man *lives a long time* (12), yet the wicked person will not *lengthen his days like a shadow*. The contradiction hints that wickedness will not flourish beyond the grave, whereas the righteous will in some way flourish after death.”¹

We are so dreadfully inclined to view present inequities as if they represent the final outcome of sin—and righteousness—but Solomon reminds us of our myopic view. God always gets the last word! While divine longsuffering prevails at the moment, Scripture repeatedly reminds us that God’s judgment is certain, and cannot be thwarted or misguided as human justice often is.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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¹D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition*, Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible commentary*. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed., Ec 8:12 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).