

“Just Do Right”

*Proverbs 10:31-11:9, Matthew 5:6, Matthew 6:19-21, 25-33,
Matthew 19:16-27*

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“Just do right,” Mark Twain said, “this will gratify some people and astonish the rest.” “Just do right.” I have no idea how many times Mark Twain said that, but my father has said it at least a million times within my earshot. “Just do right,” he would say as a parting shot of advice, as I went out the door — outside the realm of his immediate supervision and guidance. “Just do right,” he said in such a tone that conveyed both an appeal and a warning. The phrase became a coded message between us, loaded with all sorts of meaning about how to act, and what to do, and who to be. In younger, easier days, to “just do right” meant playing fairly with friends in the neighborhood; it meant respecting your elders and being mannerly; to “just do right” meant helping old Mrs. Brooks shovel off her sidewalk when it snowed in winter; it meant obeying your teachers and finishing your homework. In younger days doing right was simply learning the contrast between good and bad and between right and wrong, and it meant learning about duty and commitment.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” said Jesus, “for they will be satisfied.” What do you suppose that really means: to hunger and thirst for righteousness? It’s hard to find a word in the Bible more jammed with meaning than that of righteousness. Righteousness is a term that spills over with connotations from the hundreds of verses that mention it, and yet there’s no single definition to look up in the back of the book. Defining righteousness is like throwing darts, trying to hit the bull’s-eye from fifteen feet away. Even with a fistful of darts, we may only come close, without ever hitting the center of the target. Try to define righteousness in biblical terms, and you may have to make several attempts before you get really close. The best way to understand righteousness is to see it at work in people’s lives. See how it directs a righteous person’s living as he makes his commitments, as she makes her choices.

Consider what the book of Proverbs has to say about righteousness. Each proverb is a different stab at trying to show what righteousness looks like, or how it operates in a person’s life. Proverbs is a fascinating book because there’s no binding structure to it — it’s just a loose collection of ancient wisdom sayings, mostly no more than one or two lines each. And yet, there are profound messages when these short snippets are taken as a whole. The sages who collected these sayings were concerned to teach about real wisdom and knowledge — not as nice virtues or goals — but wisdom as a matter of life and death. Wisdom, from the point of view of Proverbs, has very little to do with how many books you’ve read or how high your I. Q. is. Plenty of smart people have very little real wisdom. Real wisdom is manifested in how *righteous* your life is. Righteousness affects the way we think and what we talk about. Righteousness means that our scales are accurate, and that we run our businesses honestly. In the language of Proverbs, righteousness is closely associated with humility, integrity, innocence, principles — and faith. These are the qualities of a life shaped by

righteousness. In contrast to these characteristics, Proverbs talks about wickedness, and deceit, and pride, and disgrace. In Proverbs the contrast is clear between a righteous life and one that is not: “The righteousness of the upright saves them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their schemes. When the wicked die, their hope perishes, and the expectations of the godless come to nothing. [But] the righteous are delivered from trouble” (Prov. 11:6-8a). The main image used in Proverbs to describe life is that of a journey down a path or a road. Those who walk in righteousness travel on a smooth and straight path, but the path of the wicked is crooked, and winding, and full of schemes and traps that, sooner or later, ensnare them. Look around you, beg the pages of Proverbs, and see that those who live in righteousness appreciate the truly important things in life. They understand what really counts, and they hold tight to that which will last forever. Thus says one of the proverbs: “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (Prov. 11:4). Righteousness is trusting that your priorities are appropriately arranged.

Time moved on, as it always does, and during teenage years, when life got wonderfully better but more complex at the same time, “just do right” was the last thing I heard before leaving to go pick up a date on a Friday night. It meant making important decisions for the years ahead — which classes to take and what to study. “Just do right” conveyed the hope that temptations would not be too strong to resist; and it meant admitting mistakes and then learning from them. Doing right became oriented toward the future, about recognizing what really matters in life — working for the things that endure well beyond the fickleness of any mood on any one day. Doing right was about priorities and sacrifices and honor — about long-lasting goodness. Through my father’s instruction and example, I learned that in the middle of complicated situations, the best way forward is always the way of right, no matter the cost. “Just do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” said Jesus, “for they will be satisfied.” In Matthew’s Gospel, we get a number of passages that help us see what righteousness means. The first is this beatitude, where Jesus proclaims his passion for righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount. When I picture Jesus teaching a huge crowd of people about such matters as the kingdom of God, I don’t see him speaking in soft, soothing tones — but LOUDLY, even shouting so people can hear him; and there’s an audible ring of desperation in Jesus’ voice when it comes to righteousness. Righteousness is something that we ought to hunger for like people who will die if right doesn’t prevail. We crave, and yearn for, and are desperate to see that the right thing is done by everybody. Righteousness is something we thirst for like people who are left dry and parched by the injustice that often scorches our world. We long with outstretched arms for the cooling, refreshing reward that comes with doing right in a world so frequently burned by wrong. When it comes to finding righteousness on our journey down the path of life, we eat it up and gulp it down, because it is the food and drink that will sustain us for the long haul — when the going gets tough and when the darkness comes on so thick that we can’t see the path anymore, those times when we walk by faith and not by sight.

Even though I left home several years ago to follow my own dreams, my father still says our coded message to me whenever we talk. Now that the stakes have been raised to a higher, more complicated level: “Just do right” means being a responsible and faithful husband. It means doing a good job in my work. “Just do right” means not

wasting anything precious — time, talents, or money. “Just do right,” he told me on the day he and my mom left Linlithgow after their last visit three weeks ago.

Indeed, Jesus has a lot to say about righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew. I’ll throw my own dart at the target and tell you how I think Jesus defines righteousness. Look at the key words and ideas that keep popping up in our New Testament lessons. Doesn’t Jesus define righteousness ultimately as a matter of trust and priorities? To be righteous means that we trust and follow God above everything else. Jesus talks about righteousness in relation to whom and in what we place our faith. Take Jesus’ words that come just after the beatitudes. Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” At the top of our priorities, before everything else, God is the object of our deepest trust and our hungering hope. The righteousness of God that Jesus came to reveal is what satisfies our thirsty lives. “These things” that Jesus refers to are all the other objects that prevent us from trusting God — not because they are so bad in themselves, but because they are not properly ordered in our lives. These things usurp God’s place as the object of trust, and we lose our grip on what really matters in life.

What is it for me and for you that inhibits our ability to be righteous? What is it for all some of the time, and for some all of the time, that prevents us from hungering and thirsting about righteousness, as Jesus said, and instead, focuses our attention, and energy, and work, and worry in another direction, thus crippling our efforts to be righteous and good? It’s our treasures on earth. Some treasures small, some large. Some treasures we were given, some we bought. Some treasures we put on display, some we hide in the bank. In a study of contrasts, Jesus wants us to see the difference between treasures on earth and treasures in heaven. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” With one kind of treasure, we’re eaten up by anxiety, but the other kind offers peace. One kind of treasure means endless questions, but the other kind brings answers. One kind of treasure is threatened by the uncertainty of tomorrow, but the other kind trusts that God knows best. Of course God knows what we need to live and get by, says Jesus, but don’t let these things be the focus of your trust and desire. Do not devote yourself to things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Instead, order your lives so that at the top of your priorities are things of lasting value and real importance. Search after God’s kingdom and righteousness, and trust God to take care of the future.

The reason I think that righteousness and ultimate trust are related is that this phrase “treasures in heaven” appears again in Matthew, in another story about priorities. It’s the case of a young man on a very sincere quest for righteousness. “Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Follow the commandments.” “Which ones?” “You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s how you can do right and be righteous. But, remember, righteousness is ultimately a matter of whom you trust at the deepest level, and so this young man knows he lacks something in the category of righteousness. Something prevents him from ordering his life along the priorities of true righteousness. “‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me.’ When the

young man heard this word, he went away grieving, because he had great possessions.” Who knows what went through this rich young man’s mind when Jesus issued this invitation to discipleship. This young man is the only individual in Matthew who receives a direct call from Jesus to follow him, but who flat-out turns it down. His grasp is too tight on things that are fleeting, and he’s not capable of trusting and following God with right priorities into the future.

If I’m right, and if I’ve gotten somewhere close to the bull’s-eye in linking righteousness to our trust in God, then we have a serious question to consider. Even if doing right is about keeping God at the top of our priorities, are Jesus’ words realistic? Given the kind of people we are, is Jesus believable when he tells us not to be anxious about the future and not to worry about our lives? Is this kind of righteousness and trust really possible for us? Well, through some bizarre and bewildering events this week, I have come to see, again, that yes, such righteous trust toward the future is certainly real for Christians. An unplanned and unpredictable and very much unwanted development happened this week for my family. I imagine that most of you would hear about it sooner or later through the grapevine, so you might as well hear it now straight from the horse’s mouth. Early in the week my father went to the doctor because his sinuses were bothering him. One referral led to another and then to another, and by Wednesday, it was clear that something was wrong with more than just his sinuses. By Friday morning a biopsy had been taken, and the diagnosis has come back that he has a malignant brain tumor. Obviously, we’ve talked on the telephone several times, and as frightening as the words *tumor* and *malignant* are, everyone involved, and especially my father, has a wonderfully hopeful attitude. At this point, no one can speculate about what the future holds. I tell you all of this because in the last few days, I have been witness to an amazing display of righteousness. Righteousness is alive and at work in my dad’s life. His righteousness has shown through, not because he is superhuman, and not because he is stoic about his condition... but because he trusts. He trusts God for the future, whatever the future may hold. Naturally, there are tears and some fear, but the anxiety is washed away in the sea of trust that knows God is in control. All of a sudden, it’s a great deal easier to appreciate the truly important things in life and to put priorities in order.

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these things will be given to you as well.”

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