

Righteousness Exalts a Nation

“Righteousness exalts a nation: but sin is a reproach to any People.” (Proverbs 14:34).

This is another of the very special and very well know and used of the verses in Proverbs. We can't help but be both reminded of Solomon's intention in writing it as well as the Lord's intention in having him do so. It is, very obviously a two-part statement that is given to cause the reader/listener to think through BOTH sides of this content equation. It is quite obvious that Solomon's intention is to tells us that BOTH sides of what he is saying be heeded and followed by his people.

“Righteousness” is a common word in the OT and is used, actually, in two forms. The form we see here speaks of quite a number of ideas, such as: justice; honesty; justness; proper moral actions, community loyalty; entitlement, just cause; and, as it has an active idea in it, to speak of just deeds. The shorter form of the word is used to speak of more abstract ideas. It is used virtually the same amount of times and can be seen to refer to accuracy, to what is correct; the right thing, what is honest; equity, what is right; communal loyalty; salvation, or to well-being.

Solomon tells us that the nature of sin, insofar as God has allowed it in the world and how it has twisted and degenerated itself in man's mind and heart is that it brings reproach to all those whom it touches. “Reproach” is a negated form of the word that is often used to speak of blessing. The positive form of the word is one of the more popular words in the NT. This popular word is used to refer to being “kindly” or “merciful”, In a conceptual sense it speaks of “favor” a couple times, even of that which is “good” and that which has the quality of “goodliness” once each. Negatively, it is not nearly as frequent as the positive usages. We see it as deserving “pity” (in a negative sense) once, “reproach” once, and speaking of a “wicked thing” (a thing deliberately wicked and thus bearing the guilt of its' actions) once.

We need to see and understand that this use of the word is speaking of some of the basic and what we could call “community” qualities inherent in a nation. Solomon is speaking of a “nation” here, namely of an entire political group and people, namely an ethnic group (as in the Gentiles or a Pagan group of Solomon's day) that is joined together politically. It is not speaking of racial relationship by any means. The only way it would be used that way is if that racial group is tied together as a national entity. But certainly is not the way it is used here.

Solomon says that this “righteousness” is what “exalts” the nation in view. In the common sense it speaks to the idea of that which is made taller or bigger; that which is lifted up higher. It can even refer to that which is heaved up in the air. One can also see the essence of these ideas in a religious or spiritual sense as well. One be lifted up (or can lift another up). In this same sense it can mean

to seem to be high or lofty or, as it is translated here, exalted, hold a place that is high. Interestingly, it can also say that whatever is the subject of the phrase can be seen to have been lifted up or made to be higher because of the actions spoken of. That is surely the case here.

I think it is clear that ANY nation would desire to be lifted up, or to gain a higher, more “exalted” place in the larger society. Solomon’s point here is that it is not just relative good deeds, but when those deeds that fit the definition, the Biblical definition of “righteousness”, righteous actions, namely, those that are the result of a “knowing” of the One True God and of those that are consistent with the commands of God, that will exalt the nation in view. Solomon, time and again, defines right acting, or righteousness, in terms of obeying and following the Words and commands of God.

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We can be even more sure of this once we consider the second phrase Solomon gives us. He says that “sin” is a “reproach” to any people; as opposed to the specifics of the first phrase. The singular mention of the “nation” is opposed to the word “people” which is, by definition, a reference to a plural group, more than a single person. Interestingly, what is said could (and often does) refer single people.

“Sin” is a special word in the OT. It is the word that was used (in conjunction with the word for “offering”), used in the reference in the early OT to speak of the “sin offering” that was a part of the Law. “sin-offering” is, in fact, the most frequent use of this particular word (296 times) of which it is tagged with “offering” 116 times. The word basically refers to that which has violated the command of God and is worthy of punishment from God. It can also refer to the condition of sin in man’s via the act of Adam where it speaks of the guilt that has been imputed to all men because of their descent from Adam and Eve.

By interpretation we see that the word “righteousness” we ought to understand to refer to religious and moral rectitude. By “sin,” as we noted, we understand as any departure from God’s Law. As these are, in individual cases, followed by prosperity or by disgrace, so equally when individual cases are multiplied into nations. The terms used here in the original (you’ll remember as being used often to refer to Gentile nation) we can see to imply foreign nations, and the argument is from them to God’s own people, of whom so much more might be expected, from whom so much more will be required, and whose reward or punishment will be proportionately great. Not to be overly dramatic, but could draw a legitimate application. We can readily see, in the details of the elements in the verse, a picture that could readily be applied to our own nation in our own time. We might also take a glance back at history and notice that there have been a number of nations in history that have been overwhelmed by wickedness and sin and have, as a result had these works and attitudes result in

calling negative attention and reproach, and thus what we can call “reproach” to them as an entity.

One writer gave some illustrations to help clarify things here:

“The annals of the chosen people, according as they were a righteous or sinful nation, are marked by corresponding exaltation or reproach.”

- Contrast, e.g., the state of the Israelites under Joshua (Josh. 1:8; 10:42; 23:14) with that of the next generation after his death (Judg. 1, 2, etc.).
- Contrast that of the Jews under Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 17:2–5; 10, 11) and under Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:7) with the state of the nation under Ahab and Ahaz (1 Kings 17, 22; 2 Kings 16).
- Observe, too, how ruin was brought upon the Canaanites by their iniquity (Lev. 18);
- How the Amalekites were destroyed because their hand was against the throne of the Lord (Exod. 17:16);
- Notice how Babylon was ultimately destroyed by Assyria for its oppression (Isa. 14:4–23; 47:6–15);
- Tyre, likewise for its pride, the result of its great commercial prosperity (Ezek. 28:2–8);
- Nineveh was the target of wrath for its love of ease and pleasure, its licentiousness and proud security (Zeph. 2:13–15).

To think a bit about the application of this idea: - If God’s Word is to be believed, a religious policy must be the best for a nation’s welfare. We might come to grips with this in our day and for our nation. And, surely, it stands to reason that

“...as there is nothing in religion to counteract the design of a wise system of civil polity, so there is nothing in a wise system of civil government to counteract the design of the Christian religion. The exaltation of the nation is the end of civil polity. Righteousness is the end of religion, or rather is religion itself.” (Spurgeon)

There can be no question in the abstract that “*what is morally wrong can never be politically right;*” and further, that a nation is respected and prosperous in proportion as its laws are good, its policy wise and generous, its morals pure, and its reliance upon God’s blessing. We ought to note that this principle applies to all nations of all times and does not depend on whatever basic or fundamental “religion” it considers to be its “true” religion. All men are conceived with and are born with the knowledge of God and a knowing of their accountability to him. All that lacks is a willingness to submit themselves to the call of the Gospel and to cease their rebellion and striving against Him, the One they KNOW to be the One True God (Rom. 1-2)

We need also realize that an opposite state of things **must needs** draw down a curse and consequent reproach and humiliation. The question for us is, how

can I, a humble individual, perform the duty of a true patriot? How can I be doing and be a part of that which our nation TRULY needs and which is essential to its continuance in the blessed state of God's good graces. This is certainly what ANY good and true member of ANY state would desire. What, then, can I do to aid in bringing (or keeping) it present/to pass?

And it may be answered thus:

1. First, by being a godly man myself.
2. Then, by doing my best that power may be lodged in godly hands.
3. Further, by helping forward religious education, moral agencies, and, in general, the work of Christ's Church.
4. Lastly, by earnest, regular prayer for the rulers in Church and State.