

March 25, 2007  
 Old Testament Godliness 101 (#1) — Fidelity, Truthfulness and Holy Resolve  
 Proverbs 4:20-27 / Job 31:1-12

It doesn't take one long (if they read through the Old Testament) to realize that some of the things which Old Testament saints considered to be the most important expressions of biblical righteousness or godliness were rarely even mentioned and often totally ignored in many evangelical churches in the past 100 years in America.

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 Speaking of this great discrepancy, Gordon Fee (my former professor of NT at Gordon-Conwell) said that when one reads the Book of Exodus, they come to laws in 22:16-20 having to do with seducing a virgin, practicing magic, having sex with animals, and sacrificing to foreign gods. Things he calls "classic sins" — the typically bad ones. sin's evangelicals are familiar with. Then he writes this:

"I mean I understand those. Those fit my evangelical heritage. God's against that. But the very next words are these, and I quote:

'Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner. Do not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do, I, Yahweh, will answer them when they cry out to me for help. If you lend money to any of my people who are poor, do not act like a moneylender and require him to pay interest. If you take a poor man's cloak as a pledge, you must give it back to him before the sunset for it's the only covering he has to keep him warm. When he cries out to me for help I will answer him for I am merciful.'

Then the passage goes on with the rest of my 'evangelical' list. As an evangelical I've read that book of the covenant over and over again and run quickly past that part to get to the things I know God is against—adultery, seducing virgins, sex with animals. I know God's against that, but this stuff about mistreating and oppressing foreigners, widows and orphans, charging people interest on loans, and having compassion on the poor — that didn't fit my evangelical heritage to well, so I read right past it. Like chapter 23:6: 'Do not deny justice to a poor man when he appear in court.' Like the Sabbath year which was expressly given for the poor. The Law says in Chap. 23:10-11: 'Do not harvest anything that grows on (your land) during the Sabbath year so that the poor may eat what grows there.' In other words, grow an entire crop exclusively to be given to the poor! The Deuteronomic code... regularly singles out the defenseless, the vulnerable, widows, orphans, the oppressed, and Levites. Why are the Levites

included? Because they (too) are landless and therefore people must take care of them. Chapter 10 verses 17-19 say: 'The Lord your God is supreme over all gods, He makes sure that orphans and widows are treated fairly. He loves the foreigners who live among you.'... 'Do not cheat a poor and needy hired servant.' (24:14) 'Do not deprive foreigners and orphans of their rights and do not take a widow's garment as security for a loan.' (24:17) 'Do not go back over the harvest. What's left is for the foreigners, orphans and widows.' (24:19-22)"

He then goes on to note that most all the curses pronounced on the Israelites, and the judgments that come upon them have to do with sins that fall into these three major categories: Idolatry, Adultery, and Mistreatment of the Poor.

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And like him I must admit that my own experience within evangelicalism has been much the same. In fact, the emphasis in those circles has often been on "sins" that the Bible wouldn't even call sins! And the sins the Bible would call the worst of all, bringing down a curse upon those who do them and even judgment upon an entire nation — like idolatry, mistreatment of the poor and underprivileged, unfair social legislation, or failing to care for the widow and orphan) — I rarely if ever heard those things preached on. And I never heard them set forth as the most important expressions of righteousness, godliness and holiness.

There was a near total neglect of the virtues the Bible considers the most important, and often a habitual focus on things the Bible rarely or never even mentions, and quite frankly, could care less about!

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Back in the mid-90's I had one man in my church in Honduras from Haiti (a pastors son and quite athletic). He was never allowed to play soccer with his friends, because his dad constantly preached that it (along with pool, going to a theatre, or attending a sports game at a stadium) were "worldly activities" and therefore sinful activities. "Godliness" or "holiness" for him, then, and so many others like him, consisted of a long list of superfluous "don'ts."

Now I never ran into that, but I do remember immense pressure (for a time) being put on girls to wear dresses and not pants, avoid lipstick, and ear rings and short hair.

And for the boys it was hair over the ears, or down to their collars (or beyond) — that was initially a big taboo! Only rebellious boys had long hair — hippies and drug users and people like Chap who listened to music with a rock beat! Add a beard and you might as well not go to church! There was no hope for you (which I always found a bit strange, since every picture of Jesus I ever saw had Him with long hair and a beard)!

The same was true of guitars and drums in the church, and any other version of the Bible but the King James. In some churches the only acceptable male dress for men was dark pants, a thin belt, white shirts, black shoes and a black tie — no colorful clothes with vibrant, happy colors.

After all it was church, right?!

The Christian life (at least to us young people) seemed more like a drudgery than a delight. Like putting on a straight jacket, rather than “entering a kingdom that was a matter of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

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It was what I’d call, “Majoring on the minors, and minoring on the majors.” What Jesus did call, “straining out a gnat, but swallowing a camel.” (Matt. 23:24)

And thus what I’d like to do today, and pick up again after Palm Sunday and Easter have passed, is MAJOR on the MAJORS. What I call in my sermon title: “O.T. Godliness 101,” or just “Godliness 101.” The more important things. The lasting things. The things that REALLY matter and count — unlike all those things I just mentioned which people made such a big deal about one generation ago, but are barely even remembered or known by most today.

I want to do what Job does and focus our attention on the more permanent, timeless, unchanging, Scriptural expressions of godliness — like fidelity, truthfulness, holy resolve, justice, generosity, social responsibility to the poor and underprivileged. Rejecting greed and idolatry; showing love and compassion; being transparent and trustworthy, and always striving to be a person of integrity, mercy and empathy.

FIVE messages on the primary expressions of biblical righteousness, godliness and holiness. What we could call majoring on the MAJORS instead of the MINORS from a chapter of Job that one commentator calls, “The Code of a Man of Honor.” The code of ethics, or standard of godliness for a man of God, or a man of faith — though it obviously applies to women just as much as it does to men!

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So FIRST, let’s go in the order they are listed in the text, and start with the one that IS very familiar to most of us raised in evangelical circles. The expression of godliness we call FIDELITY, and in particular FIDELITY IN THE SEXUAL REALMS.

Job starts off his list of biblical (or Judeo-Christian) virtues in verse 1 by saying:

“I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl. For what is man’s heritage from God above, his heritage from the Almighty on high? Is it not ruin for the wicked, disaster for those who do wrong? Does He not see my ways and count my every step?”

Now, here I believe Robert Gordis (professor emeritus at Jewish Theological Seminary) offers a better and far more understandable translation of these verses in his Study or Commentary on Job. He translates the first few verses of the Hebrew this way:

"I made a covenant with my eyes, how then could I look lustfully upon a maid? For I thought, 'If I sinned, what would be my portion from God above, my lot from the Almighty on high. Surely calamity waits for the unrighteous, and disaster for the workers of iniquity. God will certainly see my ways and count all my steps.'"

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His translation spells out in full 3 things implied or stated in the NIV translation:

1<sup>st</sup>) That God sees and knows everything about us. We can hide, and pull the wool over other people's eyes, but God knows everything, and sees everything, and even discerns the motivations of our heart for doing the things we do. Every thought we think, every step we take, every feeling we have — every urge, desire or impulse in us is known by God. And contrary to what some would have us believe, He knows them before we ever have them and always has! "Nothing is hidden from the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." There is nothing that escapes His all-seeing gaze — NOTHING!

2<sup>nd</sup>) According to Job God even "sees" when we lust, which he then goes on to assure us is a sin punishable by God. "How then could I look lustfully on a maid or a girl? For I thought," says Job, "If I sinned, what would be my portion from God above?" Therefore we see that Job understood what Jesus would later affirm as well — that looking lustfully on a girl (and it means a young girl, a maiden, or a virgin as other versions put it) is sin. As a man, and especially as a married man, he understood it was his duty before God not to let his eyes, and therefore his mind, or his affections, wander into lusting after someone other than his wife.

(And given Job's age, and the emphasis in the Hebrew on "maidens, virgins or young girls," it would denounce as especially wicked and deserving of ruin and disaster, old men, or older men lustfully looking at younger girls — "dirty old men" as we might put it.)

Because lust is sin regardless of the age, but especially in the case of older married men who should know better, Job made a covenant with his eyes never to look lustfully at a girl.

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3<sup>rd</sup>) Which brings us to the third thing we can discern from this text — that Job rightly understands that true righteousness or godliness is NOT simply a matter of one's outward behaviors or actions. But that true godliness and biblical holiness is really, and always has been, a matter of the heart. An internal matter that begins with one's thought-life, desires

and affections. The things they think about, dwell upon, care about, set their affections on, allow to captivate their heart, dominate their soul or enslave their spirit.

You see, it is true that when God graciously regenerates a soul He liberates that person from the dominion of sin and makes them new creations. He puts to death the sin nature, enlightens the mind, renews the heart, and gives us a new Spirit—His Holy Spirit. Yet, as Scripture makes clear, Deadened affections, hopes and desires can be raised to new life — in both directions. God puts to death the sin nature in us, but He also calls us to continue putting it to death. Or to make sure we don't raise it from the dead!

Speaking to believers Paul says in Col. 3:5: "Put to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust evil desires, and greed which is idolatry." "Make sure," Paul essentially says, "that what God put to death stays dead!" In other words, in regeneration God deadens sinful desires, and urges and compulsions. But if we return to them, and feed them, and entertain them, and dwell on them once again, we can give new life and strength back to that which God drained of life and strength!

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I think I mentioned before the dream I had that made that so plain to me. I thought I had overcome a certain sin, until a missionary walked into my church office in Honduras one day, and told me something that stirred it all up again.

He told me how the Baptists were going to start an English speaking Baptist Church because I "wasn't Baptist enough," and how the Pentecostals were going to start an English speaking Pentecostal Church because I "wasn't Pentecostal enough"! It so offended me that I started to dwell on it, and think about it, and mull it over the rest of the afternoon.

Then that night I had a dream where I was in a cemetery burying an old decayed body. I was shoveling dirt on it when all of a sudden, it sat up! Wow! Freaked me out! I started trying to push it back down with my shovel, but it was strong! Immensely strong! So strong that my exertion of trying to push it back down in my dream actually woke me up — sweating and breathing hard!

The meaning of the dream is so plain it barely needs interpreting! God by His grace had indeed put that jealousy / church competition, anger at denominational segregation sin to death. It was buried and decaying!

But simply mulling it over that afternoon, and feeling somewhat justified in my aggravation about it — giving it just that little bit of attention brought it back to life again. I raised it from the dead by merely by allowing my thoughts to return to it for less than half a day!

And I'm not alone. I've talked to alcoholics who have shared the same type experience. How they were dry for 5 or 10 years, and then on one occasion, thinking they'd overcome it completely, they took one drink, and that's all it took to give life back to their addiction, and send them reeling for months before they got it back under control.

The same can be said for workaholics, social climbers, gamblers, "shoppers," gossips, drug addicts, sex addicts, embellishers, those with food addictions, or those addicted to pornography. All it took was that ego stroking promotion, that chance to win a million, that one puff on a joint, that one afternoon at the mall, that one juicy tidbit of gossip, that one luscious looking piece of chocolate, that simple second glance at the video or magazine rack, or that hesitation to turn the channel quickly enough at that hotel room — and it all came back like a flood. They had been dormant so long, but merely feeding them just once gave them a renewed burst of life and initiated the intense struggle all over again!

You can't do it my friends: You can't expect clean thoughts to flow from a mind that entertains and dwells on unclean things.

You can't expect godly affections to grow in a heart that flirts with and thereby feeds ungodly attitudes and desires.

What your mind dwells on dictates what type of things spawned there, and fertilizing the mind with the seeds of sin will NEVER produce a harvest of the godliness or holiness. That's one of the reasons Paul could say, "Take every thought and make it captive to Christ" (II Cor. 10:5).

Or again, "Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatsoever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely whatever is admirable—if there is anything excellent or praiseworthy—think on such things. Whatever you have learned, or received or heard from me, or seen in me, put into practice and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil . 4:8-9).

Make that covenant with your eyes, and your mind — with God! And ask for the grace to be enabled keep it — to KEEP as dead what God has PUT TO DEATH!

Then **SECONDLY** we come to another aspect of godliness TRUTHFULNESS. In verse 5 Job says: "If I have walked in falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit (or deception) — let God weigh me in honest scales (possibly a play on words, meaning "scales that judge honesty") and He will know that I am blameless."

Job was a man who was honest. He spoke the truth. You could trust His word. No lies; no purposeful deception; no seeking to lead someone on — just what he felt or knew to be the truth.

WHY? Because truthfulness is a reflection of the nature of our God. "It is impossible," says the Author of Hebrews, "for God to lie." It's one of the things God CANNOT do — and therefore something we should not do.

Likewise, all healthy relationships are built on truth. The same is true of business transactions, court cases, investments, making future plans, life decisions, and even relations between nations.

Trust is imperative to all healthy human relationships, and trust is built upon truth!

"Let your yes be yes and your no be no," said Jesus, "for anything else (that is, anything else but the truth) is of the devil" (who is the father of lies).

Where there is distrust people withdraw, remain guarded, stay emotionally distanced from others, and withhold both their love and affection. Lies fuel suspicion, breed anger and increase anxiety.

They pervert justice, create disharmony, thwart healing, stir up dissension, alienate people, destroy marriages, divide families, breed bitterness, make forgiveness difficult, and kill all true community.

It is to display His image to an on-looking world, one of the primary traits of godliness which facilitates healthy and functional relationships / breeds a trust that helps people feel safe / share / pull together / forgive and start over. It dispels suspicion, sets our spirits at ease, and makes us willing to invest in people.

Truthfulness, therefore, facilitates love, creates unity and enhances community. "The truth," as Jesus said, "sets people free." "Honesty," as my dad used to say, "is always the best policy."

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Then LAST, we come to the trait of godliness that enhances and facilitates all the others — HOLY RESOLVE. Job says in verse 7: "If my steps have turned from the path (and he means the path of righteousness), if my heart has been led by my eyes, or if my hands have been defiled, then may others eat what I have sown, and may my crops be uprooted."

Job is so determined NOT to do such things — in fact, he has such a holy resolve and whole-hearted commitment not to do them, that he goes so far as to place a curse upon himself if he ever should! That is resolve!

To "turn from the path" is to embrace a lifestyle of sin. / To "let your heart be led by your eyes" is to covet or live like an animal, responding without proper restraint (or any restraint) to whatever impulse or urge prompts you at the moment — without regard for God, what's good or what's right. It's to be totally impulsive and do whatever pleases you whenever you feel like it.

And “having one’s hands defiled” is simply another way of saying one’s hands have been stained by participation in sin — stained by shedding the blood of innocent people or taking money as bribes or shaking hands to seal an agreement to do evil; by changing a written agreement or moving a boundary marker.

As much as following your impulses, urges and inclinations is seen as the better way in American culture — seen as being more true to yourself and who you really are, there is a sense in which no person will ever grow in godliness until they understand that being sinners our nature innately opposes godliness. It doesn’t like holiness, and equates purity of lifestyle with naivete or prudishness.

The “earthly nature” in us wants to embrace sin, participate in sin, turn from the path, be led by his eyes, and defile his hands in sin — at least on numerous occasions!

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 And LISTEN: Without a holy resolve and determined commitment (by God’s grace and belief in His Gospel) not to do such things, we will! Left to simply do what we want, we will eventually turn from the path, embrace a lifestyle of sin, let our eyes lead our hearts, and do whatever we please, whenever we please — because for people in whom the powerful principle of sin still dwells, that’s the path of least resistance. That’s what comes naturally to us.

And thus, if you have not RESOLVED to shun evil, and be a person of honor, and pursue godliness, and resist those natural and sinful inclinations — even to the point of placing a curse on yourself if you should embrace a lifestyle of sin — you will inevitably drift into UNGODLINESS. (Because sinners by nature simply do not drift into godliness!)

So, at some point or another, Christianity brings a person to a point of decision:

“Choose this day” says Joshua, “whom you will serve, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Will you? Jesus says, “Leave all and come follow me (Leave sin behind and come follow me).” Will you?

Will you choose to reject sin and pursue godliness, or will you not? Some people don’t perceive they’ve “turned from the path of righteousness” because they’re already walking with one foot in the kingdom — though the other remains in the world or playing with sin.

Will it be Jesus or the world? A life of commitment and discipleship, or merely playing the church game on Sunday, while living like sin during the week?