

Dear Friends,

Oh so many of our life's painful moments and burdens could be relieved if we truly learned the lesson of our study passage this week. How many times have you spoken hastily and in anger to a friend, family member, or church family member, only later to learn that your words caused far more harm than good? Had you paused to remind yourself that the Lord knows your life and needs just as He knows the other person, you would have patiently overlooked the situation and trusted the Lord to deal with that person as He chose. Or we witness a broader social injustice, perhaps seeing it on the news, and react in frustrated anger, "Why doesn't the Lord stop that? Why doesn't He do something? We so desperately need His help." These questions push us to take the matter into our own hands and do what we can do to remedy it, only to learn that the problem is far, far beyond our ability. Often our attempts to remedy these ills result in more harm than good.

Spend some serious time reflecting on this week's study passage. If you so imbedded the principles taught in this lesson into your thinking that you live with the settled conviction that, regardless the unfairness or wrongness, we do more to solve the problem on our knees than on our "High horse."

I can't imagine a season in my lifetime when this lesson is more ignored or forgotten, but definitely not practiced, even by many serious and sincere believers. Whatever we assess the problem of our present day to be, how much can we do to change the whole culture? Little to nothing, nothing at all, other than perhaps within our immediate circle of close friends. And how much do you believe the Lord can do to turn things around? So how do we react to the situation? Do we become frustrated, confused, and angry, and raise our voices and emotions, effectively shouting at the wind? Or do we come to grips with the reality of the situation and go regularly and conscientiously to the Lord with our prayer for his help and intervention?

This lesson contains more wisdom than you'll see on the nightly news for the next month! And, honestly, it also contains far more power to calm the storm and restore sane peace than anything anyone or any institution of our culture can possibly do.

As believers in God, we face a daily choice. Do we join the unbelieving angry, confused shouts and threats? Or do we turn away from the crowd, go to our knees, and talk to the Lord about it? Do we become part of the problem or part of the solution?

Lord help us to make wise choices and to live close to You,
Joe Holder

God's Sure Reward of the Righteous

The merciful man doeth good to his own soul: But he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh. The wicked worketh a deceitful work: But to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward. As righteousness tendeth to life: So he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death. (Proverbs 11:17-19 KJV 1900)

Each generation of a culture develops and earns its own cliché that identifies its people by their dominant traits. I lose track of all the clichés that people throw around. My personal assessment of today's professing Christian culture may not fit the populist description, but it sizes up the people sufficiently to be sadly accurate, "The me generation." People occasionally use it of the general population, but sadly Christians join the pattern instead of standing apart from it, even as they remind themselves that Christians are to be "In the world, but not of the world." This description puts the people who live up to their "Motto" gravely out of touch with Biblical Christianity. If people in this mindset could write the Bible in their own image and according to their own liking, I fear we wouldn't recognize it. Quite likely, Jesus' words in Acts 20:35, "***It is more blessed to give than to receive,***" would be changed to "*God helps those who help themselves.*" While claiming to stand apart from the

“Me first” culture, they sadly lead the example for it. They quite openly confess that they are working in their Christian service to gain a greater reward in heaven *for themselves*, seldom, if ever, thinking or saying that they work solely to honor and to glorify their God and Savior. In many of their minds, salvation itself is more about gaining salvation and recognition for themselves than glorifying the Lord. Their profession of faith is sadly upside down. Everything is reverse what Scripture teaches it should be. (Matthew 5:16; what motive did Jesus assign to His commandment for us to let our light so shine? To gain for self, or to glorify our Father in heaven?) Enough. The self-worship of the age contains no edification for the hungry child of grace. Let’s go to our study lesson and sit respectfully at her feet to learn what she has to teach us.

The merciful man doeth good to his own soul. What conduct would grow a man’s reputation for being “Merciful”? This trait has nothing to do with self and everything to do with how we treat other people, especially other people who do not always live up to their hopes and aspirations of faith. Do we glare at them in self-righteous superiority for their failures? Or do we sit down beside them and try to gently encourage them to do better? Do we dwell on their past, and scold them with white-hot words for their failures? Or do we nudge them to look to the future and encourage them to work harder and to keep their mind, heart, and focus on God from this day forward? You can only build a reputation as “Merciful” by how you treat those who stumble and may not deserve your high praise.

I love passages such as this one that play in subtle undertones with words and ideas, but they contain priceless gems of truth for our instruction. Before polishing off the gem in this passage, let’s frame our minds with a principle that Jesus taught.

He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward. (Matthew 10:41-42)

Jesus strips away the pretense of a self-centered heart and takes us directly to the motive that should drive our conduct. Suppose you see someone who struggles with an obvious need. In Jesus’ example, it could be as simple as a drink of cold, refreshing water. If our motive is to impress the person whom we regard as a prophet or a righteous man, Jesus shocks us with His answer. We shall be “Rewarded,” but our only reward shall be what that person chooses to give us—or not. Do you think, by receiving the prophet or the righteous man, you shall receive a reward from the Lord? Jesus disappoints you. You have no reward whatever from Him if your kindness is motivated by your desire to gain for yourself in that person’s eyes.

Once Jesus shocks our self-righteous bones with the first two examples, He takes us to the faith-way. Whatever kindness we show, we show with no regard either for ourselves or for those other people. Even if they are prophets and righteous men, we show this kindness for one reason. “*In the name of a disciple.*” You extend the kindness to prophet and “No-body” alike, to righteous and not-so-righteous alike. You do none of these kindnesses with any thought whatever of gaining anything good for yourself. You do it in the name of a disciple, because your sole motive and desire is to “...*glorify your Father which is in heaven.*”

This self-less principle is as longstanding as God and His faith-guidance of His people. When Abraham defeated the pagan kings who had taken Lot captive, how much of the spoils of victory did Abraham claim for himself? (Genesis 14:22-24) In principle, Abraham delivered Lot “*In the name of a disciple.*”

Jesus’ lesson in this passage is a shock to the me-generation. You do all that good stuff, and Jesus gives you nothing for it. But, in the framework of Biblical faith-living-service, His point perfectly affirms the principle. Our life and conduct are to be all about glorifying Him and nothing—not one thing—about gaining for ourselves. However, both Jesus’ lesson and our study passage holds yet another surprise for

us.

The merciful man doeth good to his own soul. When you show kind mercy to an undeserving person, all your thought and effort is directed to that person. But Solomon surprises us. In so wholly focusing our efforts to help that other, and rather undeserving-at-that person, and with no thought whatever to gaining for yourself, you actually do much good to your own soul. Unselfishly and mercifully doing good to another person with no thought whatever of personal gain, in the end, makes you a better person. You do good to your own spiritual health by the conduct. Praise God! People who obsess about self and do all to gain for self gain nothing! But people who do all with no thought whatever for self, but all for the glory and honor of the Lord whom they serve, shall gain great spiritual riches for themselves, despite not intending or thinking at all about gaining for self. That is the glorious point!

But he that is ?cruel troubleth his own flesh. No surprise, the mirror opposite, the person who makes a game out of seeing how uncomfortable he can make the people around him does his own spiritual health great harm. In effect, he celebrates self-inflicting spiritual cancer into his soul. You see, serving other people in kindness is no game to our God. It is serious business. The pawns in the cruel man's vain little game are His beloved children. If we hope to gain blessings from Him, we shall never treat them so casually as to play games with them. Any form of cruel or harsh treatment of another person inflicts certain bad consequences onto us—at the Lord's hand.

The wicked worketh a deceitful work. Whatever the wicked does, deceit is an integral part of his "Game." He strives to be cruel to others, but he hopes to deceive you into thinking he is actually righteous and fair. Solomon accurately describes the inner workings and lifestyle of an intensely self-righteous, and self-focused person. These folks occasionally find their way into churches, and they will work long and hard to (With a measure of deceit) convince the other folks in their church that they are the most righteous and godly people in the whole church. They are often rather convincing actors; they might even convince a good number of folks in the church that they are right. But they never—ever—convince the Lord. That is the point of this lesson.

*But to ?him that soweth righteousness shall be a **sure reward**.* All the while the deceitful self-serving person is busy with his deceit, often not at all noticed—as he prefers—there is a godly righteous believer quietly working away, serving the Lord by serving his brothers and sisters. The me-first person often looks for speedy recognition for his pretentious goodness. The godly person works in the spirit of the farmer. The farmer works long, hard hours preparing the soil, planting the seed, and protecting the field so that the tender little seeds can sprout and grow into strong, fruitful plants. His work ethic is long-term.

In the end, the Lord is the final Judge and "Rewarder" of both kinds of people. Solomon wrote the Proverbs to his young son. They are brief, often memorable—and at times a bit humorous—but always wise insights into life. Solomon knows. His young son will face seasons of impatience and frustration. "It just isn't fair. Some people do good and only get slapped down and ridiculed, while other people do only wickedly and get praise because they are so deceitful." Ah, young son of Solomon, listen to your father. He is teaching you an invaluable lesson that you shall often need in the life ahead of you. If you regard only the recognition and "Rewards" that people give to other people, your frustration is well-grounded and true. However, you must never forget. There is a God in heaven. He is all righteous and all-knowing. And He shall not allow one cruel deceit of the wicked or one gracious kindness of the righteous to go unnoticed or unrewarded. There is a "**Sure reward**" for that righteous man and his godly deeds.

As righteousness tendeth ?to life: So ?he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death. Our English poetry is written with measured (Metric) syllables in each line and with rhyming ending sounds to words at the end of lines. Jewish poetry was written with the metric lines so they could be sung, but the

rhythm of Jewish poetry is not in ending sounds, but in parallel lines that contain rhyming ideas. The thought that Solomon intended with “*But to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward,*” is the same thought that appears in the next line of the poem, “*As righteousness tendeth to life: So he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death.*” Because God sits in all-knowing and righteous observation of every thought, word, and deed, both the good and the bad, the deceiver and the godly, shall receive what the Lord regards as a right and righteous reward for their true conduct. The ultimate judgment that shall fall upon the deceiving wicked person and the “Sure reward” that shall fall upon the godly are both sure because both men stand or fall, not before the judgment of other people, but before the Lord Himself. Take courage, young pilgrim. Be faithful. Your God shall surely and righteously reward your godliness.

Elder Joe Holder