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THE PERMISSIVE SOCIETY

By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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When Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea waiting to be conveyed to Rome for trial before the emperor, Governor Felix invited him to preach to him. Paul spoke about faith in Jesus Christ, and we read that "as he argued about justice and self-control and future judgement Felix was alarmed and said 'go away for the present; and when I have an opportunity I will summon you'" (Acts 24:24). It is interesting to note what it was that Paul spoke about when given this opportunity to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ before the Roman Governor. He spoke of justice and self-control and the judgement to come. It was certainly a message which Felix needed to hear. He was a licentious, self-indulgent man who used his position as Governor not to administer justice so much as to benefit himself. In this he was typical of his times. Yet St. Paul did not have to twist his message to fit Felix's case; what he had to say on righteousness, self-control and judgement to come is the very heart of the Christian message. He had preached in a similar way at Athens when he argued (Acts 17) that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proof that God will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom He has chosen. In his preaching the apostle was persuading men to change their outlook and to realize that God and his purposes is the supreme reality. God's purpose implies judgement, so that the way we live becomes of real significance, for God has a purpose and he will bring everything to the test of righteousness, that is, of right relations with Him, and right relations with one another, and right relations with ourselves.

We are restored to right relationship with God through the change of heart that the Holy Spirit brings. Right relations with others means fairness and justice in our dealings with one another and right relations with ourselves implies self-control, and not self-indulgence. It is our judgement to come which makes these things meaningful. You see, if there is no future judgement, if the world and ourselves have no future, then of course the present is the important thing and self-indulgence - eating and drinking and sexual licence - become the obvious values in our relationships with other people, not righteousness but our own self-interest becomes paramount and from this follows dishonesty, and the avoidance and denial of duties towards others.

It is the judgement to come that brings out clearly that righteousness and self-control are the true values for present action, and not self-interest or self-indulgence. Jesus said that every idle word we will have to account for. Our lives will be scrutinised, and those that are approved will hear Christ's words "Come ye blessed of my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you"; while those who are disapproved will hear Christ's words "Depart from me ye cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels and they shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life". Jesus solemnly taught that this judgement to come is a fact; in Mt. 25 and He demonstrated the proof of His teaching by the resurrection from the dead, witnessed and testified to by the apostles. This is the Christian message which Paul preached before Felix and his wife. He invited them to accept the Christian world-view, namely that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He has overcome sin on the cross, has been received up into Heaven, that is, into God's presence, and is crowned with glory and honour at God's right hand where we may also ascend through faith in Him at the present time as we wait for His coming again to judge the world in righteousness. These facts, this world view, make it vitally important how we live moment by moment, and so Paul stressed to Felix the need for righteousness, that is, for right dealings with one another; and the need for self-control, that is, the use of God's gift of the body to God's glory according to His purposes and not for our own self-indulgence. Our present generation needs the same message. The Permissive Society is only another name for the self-indulgent society or the debauched society; and this is a society that has forgotten the judgement to come, it lives for the present only, as though God did not exist or as though Christ had not risen from the dead. But Christians, on the contrary, are not to share the outlook and actions of such society nor to dishonour their Lord by abusing the imagination and the body, in reading filth and viewing filth; in excess of drinking and eating, in drug taking or in sexual sin in which the permissive society acquiesces. Christians are called to self-control and self-discipline, for the Lord is at hand.

In relationships between one another, and in the world, between nations, righteousness is the basis. In Deut. 16:20 we read "Justice and only justice you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you". "Justice and only justice you shall follow". Our society needs a revived passion for righteousness, righteousness in our home relationships, in our business relationships and in our international relationships. Naturally, the devil through his instruments will be seeking to break down a sense of the obligation of righteousness. He was able to quote the Bible very fluently in the temptations he offered Jesus, and nowadays we find the Bible is similarly misquoted when its teaching about 'love your enemies' is put forward as the great principle on which we are to regulate our relationships with one another. A mushy sort of love, so-called, is substituted for right relationships and justice; but true love can only flourish when there is first of all justice and fairness and righteousness, and our doing of our duty to each other. Love is the motive for actions, but it is not the criterion for judging which action should be followed. The criterion to map out our course must be righteousness. We are to act rightly always; that is, we are to give men what is their due, and we are to act lovingly always. The two are not contradictory. Love motivates but righteousness guides. If we put love forward as the principle for guiding our actions we may lose sight of what is righteous, that is, what are our obligations.

It is only when God's Spirit strengthens us in a truly Christian world view so that we know that the present will have to give an account to the future that we are able with God's strength to do the right thing with regard to others and with regard to ourselves. If we forget that Jesus Christ is Lord and that God has appointed Him to judge the world in righteousness, as our modern society is forgetting, and as the Roman society of Felix's day never knew, then naturally we will become self-indulgent and self-seeking, neglecting righteousness and self-control. The Roman world indulged in sex and in drink, and our own society is in danger of doing so to a worse degree, because it has more resources. To the drug of alcohol which the Romans had, we add nicotine,

marihuana, heroin and L.S.D., and to sexual licence in which the Romans indulged, we can add unlimited pornography in print and in picture; and in our relations one with another unrighteousness not only allows us to ignore our obligations in the private realm of home or business, but now also on the international plane of obligation to help oppressed nations threatened by unrighteous, irreligious, totalitarian governments, and invaded by other nations, bent on conquest.

We are not able to love our neighbour till we are in right relationships with our neighbour and we will not be in a right relationship if we ignore his need when we are in a position to help.

A permissive self-indulgent society has no backbone to undertake and carry out obligations to others when this action is painful and protracted, as for example was the Vietnam war. Thus, righteousness and self-discipline go together, as St. Paul coupled them in his sermon before Felix. Our strength to persevere in righteousness and self-control comes from the knowledge that the world, including our lives is under the control of God's purpose and that God has fixed a time when He will judge the world in righteousness, and has given us the outstanding sign that this is true in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. If we look to God He will give us strength to persevere in doing what is right and He will give us joy in this.

For ourselves, in our own personal lives, we must seek a right relationship with God through forgiveness in Jesus and live according to His will, so that at the last we may receive His "well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord".

18/73 8.7.73 "THE PROTESTANT FAITH" is
broadcast every Sunday at
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