

The Blameless Pair.

by Edward Payson

To be righteous before God and walk in all God's commandments and ordinances blamelessly requires a life of repentance, faith, and obedience to God's will.

Scripture: Joshua 24:15, Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 18:20, Luke 1:6, Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:23, 1 Timothy 5:8, Hebrews 4:13, Hebrews 11:6, 1 Peter 3:7

Topics: "Righteous Living", "Family Worship"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the exemplary righteousness of Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, emphasizing the importance of being truly righteous before God, not just in the eyes of men. He warns against the delusion of self-righteousness and highlights the need for genuine repentance, faith in Jesus, and a thorough knowledge of God's commandments and ordinances. Payson stresses the significance of maintaining harmonious relationships in marriage, fulfilling parental duties, and upholding family worship. He underscores the impact of walking blamelessly in all God's commandments and ordinances on personal happiness, honoring God, and setting a positive example for others.

Transcript

"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

Luke 1:6

persons of whom the Holy Ghost has borne this honorable testimony are Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. The character here ascribed to them, so excellent and desirable in itself, is especially deserving the regard and imitation of all who are united by conjugal ties. As this union is the source and basis of all the social relations, the character of those who "are no more twain but one flesh" must necessarily exert a powerful influence, not only over the domestic circle, but through all the ramifications of human society.

It will be the object of this discourse, I. To consider and illustrate the character described in the text; and, II. To present some reasons why all who have entered the marriage state should endeavor to make it their own. I. The first thing which demands attention in the character of this truly excellent and happy pair, is, that they were righteous before God. This, my hearers, is a great thing. It is, indeed, very easy to be righteous in our own estimation; nor is it very difficult to be righteous in the estimation of our fellow

creatures; but it is by no means equally easy to be righteous in the estimation of God.

He is constantly with us: he sees our whole conduct; nay more, he reads our hearts. To be righteous before him, then, is to be really, inwardly, and uniformly righteous. It is to be the same persons in every situation, and on all occasions; the same at home, and abroad, in solitude and in society. But much less than this will suffice to make us righteous in the estimation of our fellow creatures. They are not always with us; they do not see the whole of our conduct; and of our hearts, our motives, they know almost nothing.

Of course, they know very little of our real characters. How little, for instance, do the nearest neighbors really know of each other. How many characters, which now stand fair, would be blasted in a moment, were every part of their outward conduct only, laid open to public view? And how many husbands and wives, who are generally supposed to live happily together, would be found mutual tormentors, were they fully known to the world! How wretchedly then are those persons deceived, who flatter themselves that they are righteous before God, merely because their characters stand fair in the estimation of men.

And yet how many flatter themselves in this manner. How many feel and act, as if they were to be judged by men only, and not by the heart-searching God; --as if that part of their conduct only, which is known to the world, was to be brought into judgment; and not every secret action, thought, and feeling. My hearers, permit me to warn you against this ruinous delusion. Remember that, in order to be really righteous, you must be righteous before God. Remember, that no man, who would not be thought righteous by his fellow creatures, if his whole conduct and his whole heart were laid open to them, is righteous before God.

Do you start at this assertion? A moment's reflection will convince you that it is strictly true. The whole conduct, and the whole heart of every man, is perfectly known to God. Now if God, knowing a man thus perfectly, judges him to be righteous, then his fellow creatures, did they know him as perfectly, would judge him to be righteous. Hence it follows, that every man is unrighteous, whom his fellow creatures would judge to be unrighteous, were they perfectly acquainted with his conduct and with his heart.

Try yourselves by this rule. Would men think you righteous, did they know you as perfectly as God knows you? Then you are righteous. Would men think you unrighteous, did they know you thus perfectly? Then you are unrighteous. It may, however, be necessary to remark, that in making these assertions, I proceed on the supposition, that men should judge of you by the rule of God's Word, the rule by which God himself judges of your character. With this qualification, the truth of these assertions must, I conceive, appear evident to all.

And is it not, to some of you at least, an alarming thought, that if men, did they know you perfectly, would think you unrighteous, then God certainly does think you so? And that he will treat you accordingly, unless you repent? If this thought does alarm any one, let me entreat him not to dismiss it hastily. Keep it in mind, make use of it to regulate your conduct, and to try your character; and when your heart and life become such, that an impartial jury of your fellow creatures, perfectly acquainted with both, and judging of them by the rules of God's Word, would pronounce you truly righteous, then, and not till then, may you venture to hope that you are righteous before God.

But the opinion of men, if they knew us perfectly, and judged us by the Word of God, would be according to truth; and, of course, deserve our regard. Yet while they know so little of us, as they actually do, their good opinion can prove nothing in our favor, except it be, that our outward conduct, so far as it comes under their notice, is correct. Still less can our own opinion that we are righteous prove us to be so.

Agreeably, we find St. Paul saying, It is a very small thing with me to be judged of man's judgment, yea, I judge not mine own self; but he that judgeth me is the Lord.

And is it not wonderful, my hearers, that every man who believes there is a God, does not, like the apostle, feel as if the opinions of other beings respecting him were of very little consequence? --that many, who acknowledge there is a God, should think so little of his judgment, and so much of the approbation of their fellow creatures? We do not feel and act thus in other similar cases. If we perform any work which requires the exertion of mental abilities, or of manual skill, we do not much desire or regard the applause of ignorant, incompetent judges.

But we wish to know what judicious men, men of taste and information, think of it; and we value the approbation of one such man more than that of hundreds of inferior stamp. And were there one man in the world, whose taste and judgment were infallible, and whose decision would fix forever the character of our work, we should prefer his approbation to that of all the world beside. Why, then, do we not thus supremely prize, and labor to obtain the approbation of God, the only being who really knows us; whose judgment is infallible, on whom our destiny depends, and whose sentence will stamp our characters with a mark, which can never, never be effaced!

Thus did the pious pair, whose example we are contemplating. They studied to approve themselves to God; and he declared, in return, that they were righteous before him; and had the whole world known them as perfectly as he did, the whole world would have assented, with one voice, to the truth of this declaration. Again: This pair walked in all God's commandments and ordinances blameless. I do not, however, mention this, nor do I conceive the inspired writer mentioned it, as something different or distinct from being righteous before God.

It is rather mentioned as an effect and a proof of their being righteous. To be righteous, is to be conformed to the rule of right; and the only rule of right is the will of God, as expressed in his commandments and ordinances. These two words, though nearly synonymous, are not perfectly so. The commands of God are his moral precepts, or those precepts which are designed to regulate our temper and conduct on all occasions. By his ordinances are meant those religious rites and institutions, which he has directed us to observe.

Repent, believe the gospel, be holy, --are commands; religious worship, baptism, and the Lord's supper, are ordinances. He that is righteous before God will observe both. In this respect many fail. Some pretend to obey God's commands, while they neglect his ordinances. Others visibly observe his ordinances, but neglect his commands. The truly righteous esteem all God's precepts concerning all things to be right, and observe them, not on occasions only, when it suits their convenience, but habitually.

Thus did the persons whose character we are considering. They walked in God's commandments and ordinances, as in a path which they never forsook. The term walk signifies a course of life. To walk in God's commandments and ordinances, is to have the heart and life constantly regulated by them. It is not to step occasionally into the path of duty, and then take many steps in a different path; but it is to pursue this path with undeviating steadiness and perseverance, without turning aside either to the right hand or to the left.

Nor was it a part only of God's commandments and ordinances that this pious pair observed; for we are told, that they walked in them all. They did not select such as were easy, or reputable, and neglect others. Nor did they observe those only, which they had little temptation to omit; but to use the language of the

psalmist, they had respect to all God's commandments. Hence their characters and conduct were blameless, or irreproachable. Not that they were absolutely perfect.

Some imperfection, doubtless, attended all their moral and religious performances; but there was nothing particularly blamable, no allowed insincerity or neglect. In the sight of men, their characters were spotless; and in the sight of God they possessed that simplicity and godly sincerity, which entitled them to the honorable appellation of Israelites indeed, in whom was no guile. Such is the example here presented for the imitation of all, especially heads of families. But in order that the example should produce its full effect, it is necessary to show, more particularly, what is now, under the Christian dispensation, implied in walking in all the ordinances and commandments of the Lord blamelessly. 1.

It implies the exercise of repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. These are the two first and great commands of the gospel, on obeying which our obedience to all other commands, and our acceptable observance of all Christian ordinances depends. This was the sum of St. Paul's preaching; these were the first duties which our Saviour directed his disciples to press upon all their hearers; and which he himself inculcates upon all. When the Jews asked him, What shall we do, that we may work the work of God? his answer was, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

Until we begin to perform these duties, we cannot be righteous before God, nor walk in any of his commandments or ordinances; for inspiration hath declared, without faith it is impossible to please him. 2. Walking in all God's commandments and ordinances blamelessly, implies great diligence in seeking a knowledge of them. No man can regulate his conduct by a rule, with which he is unacquainted. No man can walk in all God's commandments and ordinances, unless he knows what they are; nor can any man know what they are, unless he is familiarly acquainted with the Scriptures.

As well might a mariner find his way to a distant port, without ever looking to his chart or compass. And the commands and ordinances of God are so numerous, that without daily and long continued attention, we shall certainly forget or overlook some of them; shall never obtain such a clear, systematic view of our duty, as is necessary to its performance. That copy of the Old Testament, which Zacharias and Elizabeth possessed, was doubtless worn with frequent use. It must have been their daily counsellor and guide. 3.

Walking in all God's commandments and ordinances blamelessly, implies a careful performance of all the duties which husbands and wives owe each other. These duties are summarily comprehended in the marriage covenant, in which the husband solemnly promises, before God and men, that he will love, provide for, and be faithful to his wife; and the wife, that she will obey, love, and be faithful to her husband. This covenant has the nature of an oath, and as such involves all who violate it in the guilt of perjury.

The duties which they thus solemnly bind themselves to perform, are no more than God requires of them in his Word. He there commands husbands to love their wives, even as they love themselves, and wives to be subject in all things to their husbands. He commands them to make this union resemble that which subsists between Christ and his church. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as the church is subject to Christ.

There must be but one will in a family, but every act of that one will must be prompted by love, love like that which Christ displays for his church. In no family are all God's commands obeyed, in which this love on the one part, and this submission on the other, are not found. 4. Walking in all the commandments and ordinances of God blamelessly, implies a careful performance, on the part of parents, of all the parental duties which he has enjoined. He requires us to give them a religious education, to bring them up in the

nurture and admonition of the Lord; to teach them diligently his revealed will, speaking to them of it, in the house, and by the way, when we lie down and when we rise up; and to restrain them when they would pursue vicious courses.

We have also reason to believe that he requires parents to dedicate their children to him in baptism. That they ought to be dedicated to God, and presented to Christ for his blessing, all Christians are agreed, though our Baptist brethren do not think them proper subjects of baptism. But our Saviour's command, Suffer little children to come unto me, or to be brought to me, and forbid them not, --certainly makes it the duty of every Christian parent to present his children to Christ, and to pray for his blessing upon them, whatever may be his opinion respecting infant baptism.

Nor can Christ fail to be displeased with those parents, who, by neglecting to bring their children, do, in effect, forbid them to come. And no Christian parent, who believes infant baptism to be an ordinance of God, can pretend that he walks in all God's ordinances, while he neglects it. Indeed, while any of you, my professing hearers, neglect it, you are violating your own express covenant engagements. 5. Walking in all God's ordinances and commandments blamelessly, implies the maintaining of the worship of God in the family.

It is acknowledged, that there is no command which, in so many words, says, worship God in your families, or, maintain family prayer. Yet that this is a duty incumbent on heads of families, is, perhaps, as clearly taught in the Scriptures, as if it were the subject of an express command. We have, for instance, the example of good men in favor of it. God expresses full confidence that Abraham would maintain religion in his family. Joshua's resolution was, As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

David, after the public exercises of religion were finished, returned to bless his household; that is, to unite with them in an act of worship; and our Saviour often prayed with his little family of disciples. Families that call not upon God's name are classed among the heathen, and it is intimated that God will pour out his fury upon them. Besides, we are commanded to pray always on all occasions, and in all circumstances; of course, in our families. And St. Peter exhorts husbands and wives to live together as heirs of the grace of life, that their prayers may not be hindered, --an expression which evidently refers to united prayers, and intimates that he thought it very important that such prayers should not be hindered; and that he took it for granted that Christian families would offer such prayers.

Besides, the reasonableness, the propriety, and the happy effects of family worship, show it to be a duty. It is reasonable and proper, for families have mercies in common to ask for, and they receive favors in common for which they should unite in expressing their gratitude. And the happy effects which result from a right performance of this duty, are, innumerable and inestimable. It has a happy effect upon the head of the family himself. It tends to make him circumspect, to produce watchfulness over his temper and conduct through the day; for how can he indulge sin or give vent to angry passions in presence of the family, when he recollects that he is a priest in his own house; that he prayed with them in the morning; and that he will again be called to pray with them at night?

He cannot but feel, that, if the rest of his conduct is not of a piece with this, his own children and servants will despise him for his inconsistency. This practice has also a most salutary influence upon the happiness of domestic life. If any unpleasant feelings arise between members of the same household, such feelings can scarcely outlive the return of the next season for family devotion. Affection and peace must return, when they next meet around the family altar, unless one or the other is a hypocrite.

Thus dissensions are prevented, and domestic peace and harmony are perpetuated. I may add, that it always tends to produce, and often does produce, the most happy effects upon the children of the family. At least, it is certain that a much larger proportion of children are moral, and become pious, in families, where this duty is properly performed; than in those where it is wholly neglected, or only occasionally attended to. 6. Walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly, implies a suitable concern for the present and future happiness of servants, apprentices and dependents.

Their health must be regarded. More labor should not be exacted of them, than we would be willing should be exacted of our own children, were they placed in similar circumstances. Their rights must be held sacred. We are commanded to give unto our servants that which is equal and right, remembering that we have a Master in heaven. Their feelings must not be trifled with. If they are faulty, let them be told of their faults with mildness; but passionate, contemptuous language, should never be addressed to them.

Ye masters, forbear threatening, is the command of Jehovah. 7. Walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly, implies a careful performance of all the duties which we owe our neighbors. Our Saviour has taught us to include in this class all our fellow men, to whom we have opportunity of doing good. He that is righteous before God will ever be a good neighbor. The present and future happiness of all his fellow creatures will be dear to him, and he will promote it as far as his ability extends.

Of course, he will never knowingly injure them in their persons, reputation, or estate. And in receiving and returning their visits, he will be governed, not by the sinful or foolish customs, which the fashionable world has adopted, but by a regard to God's glory and their best good. 8. Walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly, implies a proper use of the temporal good things which are entrusted to our care. Nothing should be wasted, for God will require an account of all.

Nothing should be employed to gratify the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the pride of life; for property so employed is much worse than wasted. We must use the world as not abusing it, and employ every portion of our property in a manner which God will approve, and to the purpose for which it was given. He that wastes his possessions, wastes God's property, and the poor's patrimony; he that consumes them upon his lusts, gives them to swine. Lastly; Walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly, implies a sacred observance of the Sabbath, a diligent attendance on the public worship of God, and a commemoration of Christ at his table.

All these things are God's ordinances, and, if we except baptism, they are perhaps the only ordinances which he has appointed under the Christian dispensation. Heads of families, who neglect either of them, cannot be said to walk in all God's ordinances blamelessly. Having thus considered and illustrated the character brought to view in the text, I proceed, as was proposed, II. To state some reasons, why all who have entered the marriage state should endeavor to make it their own.

But is this necessary? Can any of you, my hearers, need reasons or motives to persuade you to the acquisition of such a character? Does it not commend itself at once to the understanding, and to the conscience of every man who is possessed of either? If, however, any of you need such reasons, they can easily be assigned. 1. God approves, and requires you to possess, such a character. He commands you to be righteous before him. His language is, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

All the commandments and ordinances which have been mentioned are his. They are sanctioned by his authority; a neglect of them will be punished by his power; a performance of them will be rewarded by his

grace. The curse of the Lord, we are told, is in the house of the wicked; but he loveth and blesseth the habitation of the righteous. And is it not reasonable that we should obey his commands? Is it not desirable to avert his curse from our dwellings, and to have his blessing in our habitations?

Who, that believes there is a God, would not have his family one of the few faithful families, on which God looks with approbation? Who would not wish that the eye of God should discover in it nothing displeasing to him? 2. Consider how much it would promote your present happiness to possess such a character. Where can happiness be found on earth, if not in such a family as has now been described? Mutual affection and harmony, peace and contentment would dwell in it. All the gifts of Providence would be enjoyed with a double relish, because they would be received as the gifts of a Father, and be sanctified by his word and prayer.

Almost every cause of domestic unhappiness would be excluded. There would be no room for anxiety, uneasiness, and alarm; for such a family could cheerfully trust in God to supply all its real wants, and to shield it from all real evils. Even if afflictions came, they would come as mercies, and deprived of their stings. In short, such a family would be of one heart and of one soul; that heart and that soul would be devoted to God, and God in return would devote himself to them.

And O, how pleasant, how soothing, how refreshing, would it be to the husband, the father, to return at evening to such a house, after the labors and fatigues of the day, to be greeted with affectionate smiles, and to return them; to shut out the world with its follies and cares, and to feel, while rejoicing in the circle of those whom he loved, that God was looking down upon them with approbation and delight; that an unseen Saviour was rejoicing in the midst of them, to see the happiness which he had purchased, and which his religion bestowed!

How sweet, to close an evening thus pleasant, and a day spent in the service of God, by uniting around the family altar in an offering of prayer and praise to their great Benefactor, and then lie down to rest with that feeling of sincerity and safety, which filial confidence in heaven inspires! Some may, perhaps, choose to call this representation, religious romance; but it is sober reality; it is no more than has been actually enjoyed; and if we see few families in which it is realized, it is only because there are few, in which both heads of the family walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 3.

Permit me to remind you how greatly such a family would honor God and adorn religion. It would, indeed, in such a world as this, be like one of those ever verdant islands, which rise amidst the wide ocean of Arabian sands, and whose constant verdure leads the weary and thirsty traveler to seek for the hidden spring which produces it. It is, perhaps, impossible for an insulated individual to exhibit all the beauty and excellence of Christianity; because much of it consists in the right performance of those relative duties, which he has no opportunity to perform.

But in a religious family, a family where both husband and wife are evidently pious, religion may be displayed in all its parts, and in the fullness of its glory and beauty; and one such family will do more to recommend it, and to soften the prejudices of its enemies, than can be effected by the most powerful and persuasive sermon. The subject is very far from being exhausted. Many more powerful arguments and motives in favor of imitating the character here recommended might easily be urged; but the unexpected length to which the preceding remarks have been extended, compels me to omit them, and to close with a short address by way of application.

Permit me to commence this address by asking each married pair in this assembly, whether their family is such as has now been described? whether they resemble the parents of John the Baptist? Are you both righteous before God? and do you walk in all his ordinances and commands blameless? If not, whose fault is it? Is it the husband's? or the wife's? or the fault of both? In some families, doubtless both are in fault; neither is righteous. Alas, that there should be such families, and so many of them among us!

Alas, that persons should ever enter the married state, so totally unqualified to discharge all its most important duties; that immortal souls should be committed to the care of those who know not their worth, and who will do nothing to effect their salvation! Is this the character of any fathers and mothers present? and if so, shall it continue such? Remember, ye who are in this state, especially ye who have just entered it, that, however happy you may now be, affliction will come, sickness will come, death will come; and what will you then do, ye who have made no provision for such events, ye who have no God to support and comfort you?

Be assured, the time will arrive, even in the present life, when you will feel the need of religion; feel that everything besides is comparatively worthless. Remember, too, ye who now love and rejoice in each other, that you must meet in another world; and that the fate of each in that world will depend much upon the conduct of the other. If you now encourage each other in neglecting religion, you will then meet as the bitterest of enemies, and load each other with reproaches and execrations.

Each one will then say, O, that we had never met! Had I not been connected with you, had I possessed a religious partner, I might now have been happy. But you tempted and encouraged me to live without God, and to neglect my Saviour; and now I must, in consequence, be miserable forever! On the contrary, should either of you now become truly religious, you may be instrumental in effecting the salvation of the other; and then with what joy will you both meet in heaven! O then, live together in such a manner, that you may hereafter meet with joy; live as it becomes two immortal beings traveling hand in hand to judgment and eternity.

Live together in this world as heirs of the grace of life, and you shall live together in heaven, as happy participants of its bliss. But there are probably other families in which the fault lies on one only of the partners. Perhaps, O husband, it is your fault, that both are not religious. You have a pious partner, one whom you cannot but acknowledge is pious. But you refuse to unite with her in making your habitation a temple of God, the abode of religion, of peace and happiness.

You do not, perhaps, oppose her; but you afford her no assistance in her journey to heaven. In this respect she is a widow. She is deprived of one of the greatest blessings which a wife has a right to expect from a husband; and must pursue her way solitary, alone. When she rejoices, she cannot impart to you her joys; when she is sad, she cannot make you understand the cause of her sadness, nor receive from you any consolation or relief. Nay more, you are the chief cause of her sorrows.

She mourns with a heart almost broken, because she is compelled to leave you behind, to fear that you will perish forever; and the more kind you are in other respects, so much the more does her grief increase. Yet she, probably, does not express it, lest she should give offence, and be reproached for indulging needless apprehensions. And while you give all this pain to her, of what happiness do you deprive yourself; happiness here, and happiness hereafter! O, then, let it no longer be your fault, that religion is not enthroned, and adorned, and enjoyed in your families; but now, while the Spirit and the bride invite, come and taste of the water of life freely.

In other cases it is, perhaps, the fault of the wife; and if so, how great a fault! What hardness of heart, what inexcusable obstinacy, does it evince, to stand out not only against the authority of God, and the invitations of the Saviour, but the arguments, persuasions, and entreaties of her nearest earthly friend! What cruel unkindness, to plant thorns in the breast of him, who looks to you for his chief earthly consolation; to seal up his lips when he wishes to give vent to the feelings of his heart; to compel him to feel that, when he prays in his family, he prays alone; and to see that his labors for the salvation of his children are rendered almost fruitless for want of a partner to assist him.

O, then, let no wife, no mother, in this assembly, be so unmindful of what she owes to her husband, her children, her Saviour, her God, as to continue in an irreligious state. And wherever either partner is pious, let both become so; and then shall the voice of joy and rejoicing be heard in your habitation, as it is in the tabernacles of the righteous. Blessed be God, there are some such families among us, --families, in which, as we have reason to hope, both the husband and wife resemble the parents of John the Baptist.

Let those who are thus highly favored show their gratitude to God, by striving to become eminently pious. Let them quicken and assist each other in the good work, and be mutual helpers of each other's faith and joy. When you return to your habitations, consult together, and inquire, whether there is any commandment or ordinance of God, in which you are not both walking; any duty which you are neglecting; anything in your families which is displeasing to Christ. If anything of this kind is discovered, put it from you instantly, however dear.

Thus you will each have increasing reason to bless God through eternity, for giving you a pious partner; and when you meet in heaven, you will love each other with pure and immortal affection, as instruments employed by God to fit each other for that world, where they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels of God.

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