

What God Desires

“To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord rather than sacrifice.”

Proverbs 21:3 NASB

The Theme

To begin, note the theme of this verse. It conveys that which God desires. This is clearly expressed by the phrase ***“is desired by the Lord.”*** Thus, the intent of the verse is to elevate our focus beyond ourselves, beyond our desire, beyond our connivances, and beyond what satisfies us and take our attention to that high peak of that which pleases God.

This present world is a “me first” world. Advertisements, activities, events, all appeal to the sense of pleasure or satisfaction one may derive from pursuing, purchasing, practicing and/or possessing some thing. In this world one’s personal satisfaction is of the utmost importance. Even doing so-called good things on behalf of others to satisfy their desires, comfort and/or help them are often advertised entered into and accomplished on the premise of what level of pleasure or satisfaction the giver will derive from the deed. For example, we are all familiar with the commercials soliciting money while promising a “good feeling” as a result of knowing one has helped others. Thus, revealing a “what’s in it for me” mindset which in turn exposes the “me first” nature of the present world.

However, we need to look no further than the Word of God for the truth concerning the “me first” mindset of the world. In a single profound verse the Bible gives us a saying of the wicked and thereby exposes the “me first” mindset of the wicked even when it comes to worship of God. They say,

“Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him, And what would we gain if we entreat Him?”

Job 21:15 NASB

This single verse reveals the “me first” mindset of the natural man and the height of his religion—himself. To the natural man God is merely a means to satisfying his desires. The natural man says, ***“And what would we gain if we entreat Him?”*** In today’s English, “What do we gain by calling on God?” or individually, “What’s in it for me?”

Even though we Christians have been delivered from this kind of world (Gal. 6:12-14; Col. 1:13) and even possess a new nature (2 Cor. 5:17), this “me first” environment is the environment we came from and still surrounds us. Additionally, the flesh which remains with us continues to seek its own preeminence. No wonder we are exhorted in Romans 12:1-2 to present ourselves to God as living and holy sacrifices, acceptable or pleasing to Him and not be conformed to this world.

Proverbs 21:3 reminds us that we are a people who are to be characterized by seeking and doing that which God desires, that which pleases Him. According to Scripture¹ doing what God desires is to be the ambition and activity of His people (2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 1:9-10; Eph. 5:10; 1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Tim. 2:3-4 and 1 Jn. 3:22) and such is certainly the theme of Proverbs 21:3.

Like Proverbs 21:3, we could say that doing what God desires or in other words that which pleases God is to be our theme. It is to be our end. By making God the end we do what we do to please Him even at the expense of meeting our own perceived desires, whatever they may be. When all is said and done, we Christians will be pleased by believing in and seeking to please God. We will not be disappointed (Ps. 22:5; Rm. 9:33; 10:11; 1Pt. 2:6). However, that we will be pleased is not why we seek to please God. God is not the means to an end for us. He is the end. The difference between God being the end and merely a means to an end is not minimal. It is actually the difference between a carnal (worldly) pursuit of God and a biblical (Christian) pursuit of God as demonstrated by the verse references above.

The Instruction

Having acknowledged the theme of Proverbs 21:3 to be that which God desires see now that that which pleases God is that His people be doers. This is expressed by the short two word phrase ***“To do”*** which introduces Proverbs 21:3. Just as in the New Testament where we are exhorted to be doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves (Jm. 1:22), we are instructed here in the book of Proverbs to be doers. There is no room in the kingdom of God for couch-potato Christians. We are called to be doers and the only faith that God authors works (Jm. 2:14-26).

The Disciplines

But God’s people are not doers merely for the sake of activity. Verse 3 of Proverbs 21 is preceded by the statement, ***“Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts.”*** The first part of this verse communicates that “me first” mindset of the natural man. In essence, he is pleased with his own way. But it is the ***Lord Who weighs the hearts***. The word *weighs* has the idea of a set of balance scales. On one side is the heart of the man and on the other is the standard. The standard is of course God’s revealed will or way expressed in His Word.² The heart is essentially being measured against the Word of God. God is looking for a heart that is balanced to His Word. When the heart is balanced by God’s Word then the way or that which is done is righteous and just and therefore pleases God (Pr. 21:3).

The two qualities of verse 3, *righteousness* and *justice* are complements of the very nature of God, Who is righteous and loves righteousness (Ps. 11:7), Who is the God of justice (Is. 30:18) and loves justice (Ps. 37:28). These qualities are the foundation of His throne (Ps. 89:14; 97:2). They speak to His holiness or separateness from sin (righteousness) and His fairness in His dealings (justice).

Consequently, *righteousness* and *justice* are two disciplines which are to characterize all the activities of God’s people because, as God’s people they are to resemble Him. The only way we

¹ Since Scripture is God’s Word (2 Tim. 3:16) then Scripture is God’s own commentary on what He desires.

² The natural man places his way or what he does on one side of the scale and on the other, his heart. He measures himself against himself and as the first part of verse 2 conveys his way is right in his own eyes.

can be confident that our deeds are characterized by *righteousness* (separate from sin) and *justice* (fairness) is if we are walking in obedience to His Word. We cannot be led by our own way for our own way will seem right in our own eyes but displease God.

The Deception

Perhaps one of the most common acts on our part that almost always seems right in our eyes is our sacrifices or in other words that which we give up for God or others or both. We think that since we give something away it must be right and therefore God must honor it. In the Old Testament the people gave up or sacrificed their animals. We might call those formal sacrifices. Today, giving up time possessions or anything for that matter, may be considered a sacrifice. We think any sacrifice we make has to be right and just and acknowledged as such by God, after all, we gave it up for Him didn't we? This is not even to mention the often occurring good feelings which regularly accompany or sacrifices, along with the notion, "How can something that feels so good be so wrong?"

The Deception Countered

But look at the last part of Proverbs 21:3, "***To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord rather than sacrifice.***" God desires righteousness and justice **rather** than sacrifice. This does not mean God would never have us give anything up. At times obedience involves sacrifice and justly results in good feelings or elevated emotions. Instead, what God's Word is conveying is the truth that God does not want His people to sacrifice at the expense of being obedient to His revealed Word. God stated this clearly to Saul after he disobeyed God's instructions (revealed Word) and even offered the fruit of His disobedience as a sacrifice to God (See context of 1 Sam. 15:1-23). After which God informed Saul,

"Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams."

1 Sam 15:22 NASB

A summary statement appears in 1 Samuel 15:22, "***...to obey is better than sacrifice...***" and in essence communicates the same truth of Proverbs 21:3. Our flesh, like Saul's would have us think our sacrifice trumps obedience or at least excuses our disobedience. But in God's economy nothing trumps obedience. Jesus modeled this very truth for us and provided the divine order between obedience and sacrifice when in Philippians 2:8 the Bible informs us, "***... He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.***"

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Pastor David Martin