

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Four things we need to follow: Follow Righteousness

Good morning! Today we start a new series called, "Four things we need to follow." The series is based on 2 Timothy 2:22, *"Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."*

Over the next four weeks, God willing, we will look at following righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Today we start with the first of these, righteousness.

Righteousness has been described as "the character or quality of being right or just." Righteousness is an attribute of God, just like His faithfulness. These attributes are consistent with God's nature and promises. God's "righteousness" is seen in the death of Christ, *"Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness"* (Romans 5:24-25). God is not indifferent to sin and the death of Christ demonstrates God's holiness in His judgment of sin.

The Lord Jesus refers to righteousness in terms of whatever conforms to the revealed will of God, *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled"* (Matthew 5:6). He also calls us to *"seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness"* (Matthew 6:33).

Paul writes, in the New Testament, of the righteousness of God as God's gift of grace by which all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are brought into right relationship with God. This righteousness cannot be attained by obedience to any law, by personal goodness or any other means other than faith in Christ. The person who trusts in Christ becomes *"the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). This means becoming in Christ all that God requires someone to be. This only happens by faith. Paul explains this by using the example of Abraham who, *"believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness"* (Romans 4:3). In Romans 4:9 we read, *"faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness."* By faith we are brought into this new relationship with God in Christ. In turn this leads to the fruit of righteousness in our lives which is conformity to the will of God.

Peter writes, in the same way, of *"the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 1:1), meaning the righteous dealing of God with sin and sinners on the ground of the death of Christ. God did not cease to be holy in making us righteous because the death of Christ dealt with our sin. This is conveyed through the Gospel which, in Hebrews 5:13 is described as the *"word of righteousness."*

The righteousness we have in Christ on the basis of what He has done for us has a response in our lives in terms of us now living in a righteous way. This is not self-righteousness but a desire to do what pleases God and benefits the people of God and our fellowmen. So in Romans 6:15-22 Paul writes, *"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life."*

This practical righteousness is also described by Paul as the *"breastplate of righteousness"* in Ephesians 6:14.

But how do we follow righteousness? I was considering this question when I attended the funeral of an old friend recently. He was an ordinary man who worked in the building trade who expressed his faith in very practical ways. He was one of most faithful Christians I have ever known. He had suffered serious illness over recent years but this did diminish his bright faith in Christ. At the service by the graveside he was described by another old friend as being just like John Bunyan's character, Mr. Helps. It was a fitting tribute. Earlier, in the church service, the speaker recalled our friend's last contribution at the breaking of bread before he died. He read Psalm 23.

As thought of my friend's life it occurred to me that Psalm 23 gives us some clear guidance on how to follow righteousness. Psalm 23 is one of the best known passages in the Bible and it has always impressed me how the Spirit of God packs into its six short verses the secret of living a life pleasing to God of blessing to others.

It starts with the **Person of the Lord**: *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."* David was an extraordinary shepherd. When Samuel arrived at Jesse's house in 1 Samuel 16:6, David was not there. He was keeping his father's sheep (1 Samuel 16:11). When he was asked by his father to visit his brothers at the battlefield, he left the sheep with a keeper (1 Samuel 17:20). Before meeting Goliath he informs Saul, who had doubts about the young shepherd's ability to fight the giant, that he had killed a lion and a bear to protect his flock (1 Samuel 17:34-37). What made his young man so faithful and courageous? He knew LORD as his shepherd. The long days and nights spent looking after his flock of sheep were not wasted. It was during this time David learnt about the character and care of God just like the other great shepherds who preceded him, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. It was also where he learned to become a worshipper. This fellowship with God prepared and equipped him to become first a man after God's own heart and then a king.

Psalm 23:2 is about **Pastures**: *"He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters."*

It is interesting that Peter writes, *"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away"* (1 Peter 5:1-4).

In John 21 the Lord Jesus, who had already called Peter be a "fisher of men" (see Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17), that is an evangelist, calls him to be a shepherd or pastor. In John 21:15 Jesus commands Peter to feed his lambs. In John 21:16 he asks him to shepherd his sheep and then in John 21:17, to feed His sheep. His last words to Peter in this wonderful chapter are, *"Follow Me"* (John 21:22).

Before any of us can undertake a pastoral ministry we have to learn to be shepherded ourselves. Jacob speaks about this process at the end of his life when he blesses the children of Joseph, *"God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed [shepherded] me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads"* (Genesis 48:15).

The picture of sheep feeding in pastures and drinking beside still waters (Psalm 23:3) is a metaphor for learning in the presence of God. We can appreciate the benefits a flock of sheep gets from feeding and watering together. In the same way the presence of God, the word of God and the fellowship and support of the people of God provide us with the spiritual food and refreshment we need. It is something, rather like the collection of the manna in the wilderness (see Exodus 16), to be engaged in day by day and on a personal and collective basis. The strength we receive from "God's pastures" is necessary for what comes next, Psalm 23:3: *"He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness. For His name's sake."*

These **Paths** suggest direction, action and purpose. It is one thing to know the direction we should go in and it is another to walk in that direction. Psalm 23:3 helps us to do what Paul asks of Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 - follow righteousness. We will never be able to go in the direction God wants to go in unless we stay close to Him and follow him. This thought is expressed in the lives of Enoch and Noah who are described as walking with God (Genesis 5:22-24 and Genesis 6:9 respectively). The shepherds of the Bible did not drive their sheep but led them. and Jesus, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), is the Person we follow. Peter remembered the Lord had told him to follow him and not be distracted by others. He later encourages his fellow Christian to do the same, *"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps"* (1 Peter 2:21).

We get our direction for personal actions and actions as the people of God from the word of God, the person of Christ, the guidance of the Spirit and prayer. Such actions should never be out of character with God's righteousness. The purpose of this is not simply to do good, although this is so important, but *"for His name's sake."* In other words our actions should demonstrate the goodness and greatness of God. Our guidance is simple - is what I think, say and do worthy of the Saviour who loved me and gave himself for me? This challenging guidance also results in immense blessing.

David goes on to describe a pathway which can be difficult and painful: *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me"* (Psalm 23:4). But what is central to this verse is not the valley of the shadow of death but the Presence of the Shepherd. David experienced the valley of death on many occasions chiefly in the Valley Elah when he met Goliath

(1 Samuel 17:1-47). What he focuses on in Psalm 23:4 is the presence of God. As we follow righteousness the Lord promises to be with us. We will not always be thanked when we seek to do what is right. In fact we live in an age when righteousness can be ridiculed particularly when done in the name of Christ.

Peter writes about the subject of suffering for our actions, *“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter”* (1 Peter 4:15-16).

The essence of his teaching is twofold:

1. Don’t be unrighteous, don’t do the things God tells you not to do.
2. Take the opportunity to praise God if you suffer for being a Christian.

This is a difficult one live up to but Peter had demonstrated its power when suffered in Acts 5:40-41 *“When they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”* Paul and Silas demonstrated the same faith in Philippi in Acts 16.

The Psalmist writes of not fearing evil because God was with Him. I have always been impressed by the examples of men and women of faith who were victorious in the most adverse and difficult of circumstances and those who made the ultimate sacrifice in faith. In Daniel 3 we have a vivid example of this in the faith shown by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. In spite of the fate which awaited them, their answer to King Nebuchadnezzar’s threat of death was: *“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up”* (Daniel 3:16-18).

This response infuriated the King and the three friends were thrown into the furnace. What happened next is very powerful: *“‘Look!’ he answered, ‘I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God”* (Daniel 3:25).

This event reminds us of the Lord being with His suffering people. This is what Jesus explains when he appears to Saul on the road to Damascus: *“Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”* (Acts 9:4-5)

Jesus speaks of experiencing the suffering of His people because he is present with them in a spiritual sense. But David also describes the presence of the Lord in relation to His rod and the staff (Psalm 23:4). Near our front door we have a shepherd’s crook. Nailed to it are small badges of places we have visited over the years. As I come through the front door and notice the crook, I am reminded of the many places and times we have known the presence of the Lord and His guidance and help along the Christian pathway. We have made many mistakes and got a lot of things wrong but He has never left or forsaken us. Sometimes He gently taps us with His staff to keep us on the pathway; other times He has had to drag us with His crook out of dangers. Sometimes these are of our own making. Both experiences demonstrate an unchanging love and constant stream of grace. And these experiences also give us a greater desire and conviction to follow righteousness.

Psalm 23:5 is about **Provision**. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.”*

Psalm 23 is about a journey that begins and progresses with the Shepherd. We have considered the challenge and cost of following righteousness, but there is also the certainty the Lord’s provision. The sheep were feed in the midst of enemies. There was always a lion, a bear or a wolf or thieves about. But David protected his sheep in the midst of all the dangers He constantly watched over and provided for his flock. In Psalm 23:5 he uses his own experience to illustrate how God does this for us. He has promised to uphold us as we follow righteousness. We are not to be intimidated by the world we live but to live in the assurance of God’s power to keep us in it. As Peter writes: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”* (1 Peter 1:4-6).

This keeping power enables not only to follow righteousness but also to keep on following. Paul knew Timothy had followed righteousness, faith, love, and peace for a long time. He was encouraging him to go on following. The Christian life is a marathon and along the way we need to be encouraged in the midst of a society in which the

Christian is increasingly under attack. Our job is keep walking along the paths of righteousness. The prophets of the Old Testament stood out against unrighteousness and the Lord Jesus is spoken of as anointed by God, *“with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him”* (Acts 10:38). God is looking for the same activity in our lives and provides all we need to follow righteousness.

David ends the Psalm with the words of Promise: *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”* (Psalm 23:6)

As David looks back, he sees the evidence of God’s goodness and mercy and he looks forward to see the end of the journey in the house of God. Equally, we can look back to see the ways in which God has kept and blessed us. We can also look forward to the hope we have in Christ. Psalm 23 has been given the title of “The Shepherd’s Crook”. It is preceded by Psalm 22 “The Shepherd’s Cross” and it is followed by Psalm 24 “The Shepherd’s Crown”. The titles fit well with the Lord Jesus being described in the New Testament, as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20) and finally the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). These three Psalms also remind of the three great themes of true Christianity - **love** shown at the cross by the Good Shepherd, **faith** now in the resurrected Great Shepherd and finally **hope** in the coming Chief Shepherd.

The friend I referred to earlier is now in heaven. I will always think of him as one who followed righteousness by knowing the Good Shepherd. As I remember his final reading of the Psalm it reminds me that we have everything we need to help us to fulfil Paul’s call to follow righteousness. We need to know the Shepherd’s Person, to feed in His Pastures, to walk in His Paths of righteousness, to know His Presence and Provision and to be assured of His Promise to guide us into our heavenly home.

“Walk in the way of goodness, and keep to the paths of righteousness” (Proverbs 2:20).

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