

A Call for National Rebirth through Righteousness

Texts: Prov. 14:34; 21:3; Psalm 106:3; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8)

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INTRODUCTION

Our main text of today is Prov. 14:34 that says, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” The importance of the first affirmation in this verse is indicated in the Hebrew version where, unlike what obtains in most Hebrew sentences where the verb precedes the subject, the subject comes before the verb. This change in pattern in Hebrew sentence structure is usually done when the overwhelming emphasis is on the subject as in this case, ‘righteousness’. The word translated ‘righteousness’ is *sedeqab*. It means “being just,” “doing (things) right,” “making right,” or “doing justice.” Adjectively it refers to doing things that are ‘correct’ and/or ‘lawful’. It has two major dimensions of operation, namely, righteousness as a theological affirmation referring to God’s gracious justification of a person through faith, and righteousness as a social ethic. Righteousness as God’s gracious imputation of right standing with Him deals with individual sin; while righteousness as social ethic deals with social sins. Either way righteousness is God’s remedy for sin, whether at the individual or social level.

Our primary focus in this message is the socio-ethical dimension, which itself is further subdivided into two parts, the moral and the legal. Morally it refers to right behaviour or status in relation to some standard of conduct accepted in the community. In the case of the Israelites, the standard of conduct is not plucked from the sky but is drawn from the tenets of the covenant relationship they have with God as enshrined in the law. On the legal plane, it entails the adjudication of such behaviour or status as well as some claim to it. Such adjudication is not according to the whims and caprices of those saddled with the responsibility of adjudication but according to the tenets of the law. Thus, from a biblical perspective, righteousness is not a privatised or personal code of behaviour or contrived parochial set of ideas of a few but a divinely arranged set of ethical principles for harmonious interpersonal and social relationships. Such principles promote equity, fairness and justice for all. It is on the basis of this that we find the symbiotic relationship between law and justice: the law delineates, promotes, and upholds justice, while justice protects and preserves the law. Any other thing is an aberration.

So when it is stated in Prov. 14:34 that ‘righteousness exalts a nation’, it is saying that any nation where things are done right and rightly, just and justly, correct and correctly; any nation where equity and fairness thrive, where there are just, impartial, objective and clear-cut rules of conduct for the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the able and the disabled, men and women; any nation where there is no capricious manipulation of the rules of conduct; any nation where the rulers and the ruled have a common vision of and quest for what is right and just, no matter the colour of the skin of her citizens, no matter the languages spoken by her citizens, notwithstanding the system of government they operate (no system, no matter how good, can work within a bad structure!), no matter how religious or non-religious they might be, such a nation will prosper; such a nation will be elevated, such a nation will be among the top nations in the world. Trooping into churches and filling mosques and prayer grounds without commensurate practical application of the moral demands of faith in God is useless in bringing about progress to a nation. **‘Righteousness exalts a nation!’**

The verse does not say ‘prayer’ exalts a nation; it does not say ‘fasting’ exalts a nation; it does not say unending series of conferences and negotiations that lead to nowhere exalts a nation; it does not say church attendance and filling of the sonic space with loud religious songs exalts a nation; it does not say that replacement of the dramatis persona in government would necessarily exalt a nation. You may change those saddled with state power as many times as you wish, but without positive ethical and moral

transformation among the people and in the institutions, systems and structures of governance, you would be engaging in a rigmarole journey, a journey to nowhere, a jamboree in futility. **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'**

Let me reiterate, if a people pray, fast, organise seminars and conferences, and if they change the personnel of governance several times over, without righteousness, without social justice, without equity for all, such a nation will never make it. Rather, the opposite will be the case. Sometimes when I hear various groups and bodies and even the Government calling for more prayers for our nation, I laugh. This is because oftentimes such prayer sessions at best are veneers to cover-up the ineptitude, injustice, and wickedness in the land and at worst avenues to deaden the conscience of leaders with blood in their hands or give them a feel-good semblance of divine approval. Some of the participants at such prayer programmes are part of the perpetrators and/or sponsors of the atrocities and social vices bedeviling our nation. If we want our nation to rise and occupy a pride of place among the comity of nations, we must heed the call, **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'** We must embrace righteousness as a lifestyle in our attitudes, conducts and actions. We cannot hide under the facade of empty religious shibboleths and activities while embracing wickedness and romancing with corruption and expect God to hear our entreaties for the healing of our land. If we continue in our Ostrich-like denial and fail to address the structural injustices within our political economy that have hindered our progress, we would continue to grope in the dark and live in fools' paradise. **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'**

We cannot continue to pass on congealed sectional hatred, frozen enmity and prejudiced mistrust and expect to move forward as a nation; we cannot encourage, abet, support and cooperate with corruption and give chieftaincy titles to treasury looters and expect our nation to make progress; we cannot give front-row seats at religious, cultural, social and political functions to criminals and killers and expect our nation to be taken seriously; we cannot sell our political franchise to the highest bidders during elections and expect good, responsible and responsive governance; we cannot engage in newspaper conviction of suspects and expect justice for all; we cannot continue in our naive and inexplicable acquiescence to bad policies of state and expect a miracle of national greatness; we cannot continue in an unending and needless adjournment of court cases and expect our land to move forward; we cannot continue to tolerate extra-judicial killings and the incarceration of innocent citizens in police cells and expect our nation to make progress; we cannot continue to mistreat pensioners and the aged and expect a magic of national rebirth; we cannot continue to tolerate a system that allows the owing of workers' salaries for months and expect a miracle; we cannot continue to allow the 'Ghost Worker Syndrome' (GWS) in our economy and expect development; we cannot continue on the part of avarice, pride and arrogance and expect progress; we cannot continue with the situation where lawmakers are law breakers and law enforcement agents behave as if they are above the law and expect a miracle. **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'**

When leaders are infected with unconscionable and insatiable greed and acquisitiveness; when they turn our collective commonwealth into their private pockets without much consequence; a situation where hospitals cannot work, social amenities and infrastructure are comatose, where universities are glorified secondary schools due to underfunding, where research centres are nothing but relaxation spots for a few eggheads due to lack of research tools, where individual and corporate citizens have to provide for their own security, water, electricity, road, etc.; where industries are folding fast and industrial complexes are being turned into worship halls, we cannot move forward. A nation that cannot guarantee something as basic as regular energy supply is a kindergarten nation pretending to have arrived. A nation that tolerates systemic corruption in her civil service infamously represented by the 'Missing File Syndrome' (MFS) is doomed. A nation where starting a business is herculean task froth with administrative and local community bottlenecks cannot make it. **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'**

As a people, we cannot continue with our militarised type of elections and expect a miracle; we cannot sustain our Gestapo electioneering campaign methods and expect good results; we cannot sustain our penchant for electoral manipulation and win-at-all-cost mentality and expect good outcomes; we cannot continue with a culture of undue demands on politicians and those seeking political offices and turn round to expect them to deliver democratic goods; we cannot continue with a culture of impunity among the political elite and expect things to be better; we cannot continue to allow the culture of arming youths and engaging them in battles of attrition and mutual self-destruct and expect a miracle; our future would remain bleak if we sustain the present rate of youth unemployment, for education + unemployment + idleness is a ticking time bomb that turns youths into an army of literate and skilled destroyers; when PhDs are applying for driver jobs not because they wish to but due to circumstances, you know that disaster has come. **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'**

If we like let us adopt a thousand Vision 20:20:20s or even 30:20:20, if we as a people continue on the path of inequity, ethnocentrism, nepotism, religious bigotry, wickedness, corruption, ineptitude, and oppression, development will remain a mirage and pipe-dream. The *primary* reason why we are in our present economic conundrum is not necessarily the scarcity of resources or dwindling accruable revenue; rather, it is due to years of extravagance, squandermania, and mismanagement of resources by most of those in power, compounded by the lack of deep cerebral content in governance. There must be righteousness in the land because imbibing it exalts a nation; it lifts a nation high; and it brings triumph to a nation. But sin is a reproach to any people: sin demotes a nation; sin produces decay and retrogression. Sin here refers to any wrong or offence against a standard. National exaltation and reproach are two options open to every nation-state. We must choose between the rule of law and the rule of the strongman; and we must choose between making the sacrifices for true national greatness and the false promises of a utopian giant. The sets of choices are open to us. Either we embrace righteousness and make progress or continue in sin and sustain our spiral into more reproach. The choice is ours to make. Hence this call for national rebirth through righteousness! **'Righteousness exalts a nation!'**

REASONS FOR AND ADVANTAGES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Before I get into specific areas wherein we need righteousness in our nation, a pertinent question to ask is: why/how does righteousness exalt a nation?

1. Righteousness promotes meritocracy
2. Righteousness upholds excellence
3. Righteousness engenders development
4. Righteousness nurtures the production and/or distribution of quality goods and services
5. Righteousness enhances national harmony
6. Righteousness ensures equity for all
7. Righteousness promotes the egalitarian ethos and the rule of law as it is a social leveller
8. Righteousness elevates the status and reputation of a nation
9. Righteousness preserves good governance
10. Righteousness creates a conducive environment for genuine peace and reconciliation to bud and blossom

AREAS OF NATIONAL REBIRTH THROUGH RIGHTEOUSNESS

In which areas do we need rebirth through righteousness? There are several areas but we wish to limit ourselves to the following seven:

1. **Righteousness in the Political Sector – The Government:** There must be righteousness in the three arms of Government – **The Executive Arm:** Executive power is a sacred trust from God given to its holders through the people to be judiciously used in service to humanity and not an

exclusive or inherent right to coercion and control. Holders of executive power are not masters of the people but servants elected or appointed for the common good of all. They are servant-leaders, not master-overlords. Any deviation from this ideal is a negation of the divine purpose of government. **The Legislative Arm:** Every legislator must remember one truth: God as the ultimate Law Maker and Law Giver requires them to be guided at all times by the rules of justice and equity in their lawmaking business; the hallowed chambers of lawmaking shouldn't be turned into a privatised club for the pursuit of parochial or self-interest. As the Early Church Father Tertullian wrote in his *Apology* in c. AD 200: "What recommends a law is not the number of its years, nor the dignity of its makers, but its equity and nothing else." Lawmakers should be reminded of the warning contained in Isa. 10:1-2: "Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune, *which* they have prescribed to rob the needy of justice, and to take what is right from the poor of My people, that widows may be their prey, and *that* they may rob the fatherless." **The Judicial Arm:** There is perhaps no better way of conveying the call for righteousness in the most sacred of the three arms of Government, namely, the Judiciary than God's injunctions through Moses in Exod. 23:6-8: "You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous." The Judiciary must at all times ensure that the innocent are not condemned and the guilty are not acquitted. There is nothing more offensive to God in the administration of justice than this.

2. **Righteousness in the Social Sector – Civil Society:** There must be righteousness in professional bodies, labour unions, community development bodies, NGOs, etc.
3. **Righteousness in the Economic Sector:** Commercial and business life and transactions of the people of the nation must be guided by the tenets of righteousness.
4. **Righteousness in the Educational Sector /the Academia:** The need for righteousness in the overall educational sector cannot be overemphasised. This covers all the levels from pre-nursery to tertiary education.
5. **Righteousness in the Security Sector:** A word is pertinent here for all law enforcement agencies and agents: Nigerians are not slaves in their own fatherland but bona fide citizens deserving of basic human rights and respect for their dignity as persons; and suspects are presumed innocent until proven guilty. These are known truths but which are often ignored by law enforcement agents due to general ignorance about basic rights amongst the citizenry. Two major ways these fundamental principles are breached are undue detention without trial and the use of torture. Nigerians must unite in unequivocal terms against the use of these archaic and lazy methods of investigation and insist that they be criminalised. Unlawful detention of one is unlawful detention of all; and torture of one should be seen as torture of all.
6. **Righteousness in Interpersonal Relationships:** Righteousness must be seen in the home life and interpersonal relationship of the people: between husbands and wives, between parents and children, between neighbours in the yard, and between colleagues in the office (cf. Gen 18:19)
7. **Righteousness in the Church:** The Church in any society ought to be its moral bastion and church leaders its ethical gadflies as they add prophetic voice to matters of state as they commend what is acceptable and condemn what is objectionable. But, unfortunately, there is so much moral decay within the body of Christ today as seen in the overemphasis on wealth without wisdom, popularity without piety, and health without holiness. The gospel has been turned into a means of making money and the church has been so commercialised that sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between a preacher and a businessman. Whereas the NT Church invaded the world with the message of salvation, today the world has invaded the Church with its message of hyper-materialism. Some church leaders are more preoccupied with the pursuit and/or accumulation of titles, positions and power than portraying and proclaiming Jesus' teaching and exemplary lifestyle

of love, simplicity, humility and service. Some of the worst crooks in our society are church officers. There is therefore the need for righteousness to return to the Church.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude this message with the following quotations from one of the Early Church Fathers and from Scriptures:

Ambrose of Milan (AD 339-397): “Justice... is a resplendent quality. By serving the good of others rather than self, it makes community and association possible. It holds the highest place, has everything subject to its judgement, offers help, supplies resources, does not refuse responsibility but accepts the risks that others bring... The scope of justice is apparent. There is no place, no person, no time to which it is irrelevant. Even our enemies benefit from it.”

Psalm 106:3: “Blessed *are* those who keep justice, and he who does righteousness at all times.”

Prov. 21:3: “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.”

Amos 5:24: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (NRSV)

Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (NKJV)

In his prophecy about Jesus’ reign, Isaiah says, “Of the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with **justice** and with **righteousness** from the [latter] time forth, even forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” (**Isa. 9:7**, AMP, emphasis added.) If Jesus is the epitome of justice and righteousness and His eternal government will be marked by same, we should then not do less as His followers. We need righteousness in our nation. Let it reign in our land, from the top to the bottom and reverse because, “**Righteousness exalts a nation!**” Let’s embrace it.