



Minutes With Messiah

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River of Lights

Every December along the Rio Grande, the Albuquerque Biopark (the zoo/aquarium/botanic park in Albuquerque NM) holds a celebration called the River of Lights. Thousands of lights adorn frameworks in the shapes of animals and objects in a fantastic nighttime display. People come from all over the world to see this event. Imagine what it would be like if they spent all that time and money to create these light displays, and then would not let anyone see them.

Hanukkah begins the evening of December 24 in 2016. One of the requirements of the weeklong celebration is the nightly lighting of the menorah. One does not merely light a menorah in a back room. A part of the requirement is that the light be positioned so that it can be seen from the street.

Even though the tradition of lighting the menorah candles may not have begun in the 1st Century CE, Jesus understood the principle. One of his most famous sayings has to do with the hiding or display of light.

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matt 5:14-16)

Sometimes it takes courage to shine the light. There was a time in Germany when having a visible menorah became a dangerous requirement, yet many Jewish people continued to let the light shine forth. (And many non-Jews did so, too, in solidarity against hatred.) Actually, there was a time in many countries, including England, when this was a dangerous practice. In New Mexico and Arizona, many Jewish people had to hide their light under penalty of death. Some of these would still light the menorah and let it shine, but in remote places rather than their own homes. In Spain, Maimonides advocated conversion in name but not in practice. He held that martyrdom was only necessary if one was forced to publicly violate the Law of Moses, but one could do more good living than dead.

In like manner, Christians have been persecuted in many places for letting their figurative light shine.

Sometimes that persecution has come from others who called themselves by the same name; most famously it has come from unbelievers of various sorts. Like the Crypto-Jews, many shine their light in remote places such as catacombs or private homes. Others shine their light openly and suffer for it. Today in many countries Christians (and Jews) are beaten, expelled, or killed because they expressed their faith, or worse, openly attempted to gain proselytes.

The persecution is not always as open as beatings, or even registration on a list. It doesn't take being forced to wear a yellow star to be subject to persecution. Sometimes it comes in the guise of extreme patriotism. Sometimes it comes in laws banning certain pieces of clothing. Sometimes the persecution even comes from well-meaning Christians who cross the line and demand that those they consider greater sinners follow God's will in spite of their unbelief. (This is a form of Christian super-patriotism.) Regardless of the form of persecution, we have a long history of people who quietly continued to let their light shine, regardless of circumstance.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the first full day of Hanukkah is the same day that some Christians celebrate the birth of the Messiah this year. In America we have gone through a contentious presidential election that was characterized more by lies and hatred than in any election cycle in memory. Our current president ran with a campaign slogan of "Hope." That is what the light of Hanukkah symbolizes, rather than divisiveness. Now is a time when Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and many others must come together and place our symbolic menorot in the windows, so that hope shines out.

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Self-Improvement

For years now, self-help books have been quite popular. So popular, even, that a whole series can call its readers “dummies” without apparent insult. Nor is it a recent phenomenon. The ultimate self-help book from the 1950s, “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” has been reissued. People don’t just want to know how to make wine, invest wisely, or use their computers; some still want to improve themselves. The Bible frequently holds advice for self-improvement. When Israel was in the depths of sin and rejection of God’s ways, Isaiah offered this advice:

He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the stronghold of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure. (Isa 33:15-16)

Right Living

Walking righteously and speaking uprightly. Sounds easy. But as with so many things in life, it isn’t as easy as it sounds. What does it involve?

How many feelings have been hurt because of a careless word taken in a way that was never intended!

If one is to walk righteously, one has to know what righteous living looks like. Certainly we can look at others and model ourselves after their righteous lives. Ultimately, though, that is a counterfeit righteousness, a copy. A Renoir or van Gogh is valuable; a print of the same picture is less so, and a photograph in a book is of no monetary value in itself. So it is with righteousness.

The first step to walking righteously is going to the source of what righteousness entails. To truly walk in righteousness one must study righteousness. That means reading the word of the Righteous One. David knew the value of Bible study. Every verse in Psalm 119 contains a variation on the words law, commandment, ordinance, etc. Only by looking into the law of God can we know what that law contains. If you receive a wrapped present, you

can guess at its contents. Sometimes the giver might give a clue or hint that helps (or hinders). You have to open the package to know what is really inside it.

David said, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” (Ps 119:105) John wrote, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7) You can’t walk in the light if you don’t carry the lamp.

The Hebrew word translated “righteously” is often interpreted as charity or almsgiving. Jews are familiar with a tzedakka box. (Even Jesus knew this box. “And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites.” (Lk 21:1-2)) While it is not the entirety of walking righteously, our treatment of the poor is certainly part of it. Jesus said that at least part of how we are to be judged depends on our charity. (Matt 25) James devoted a significant portion of his letter to the contrast between treatment of rich and poor. Yes, some of the people on street corners are pulling a scam. But do you want to appear before Jesus and say that you didn’t help someone who legitimately needed help because a small percentage might not really need it?

What is speaking uprightly? Some might argue that the word can be translated “directly,” and so they can speak unkind words under the guise of “telling it like it is.” That is not what Isaiah meant. More often the word is translated “uprightly,” “smoothly,” or “equitably.” One of the areas where many, or even most, people fail in their righteousness is in the area of wicked speech. This is what the Jews call *lashon hara*, and it is why Miriam was struck with leprosy. (Num 12)

The story is told of a famous rabbi who was traveling with a disciple. They stopped at an inn for the night. The rabbi was horrified when his companion complained that the soup was too salty. He explained that the owner of the inn was that moment ready to fire the cook because of his casual comment. We never know the full consequences of our speech, and so need to be extremely careful about even a seemingly innocuous remark. How many feelings have been hurt because of a careless word taken in a way that was never intended! And how much easier it is to be misunderstood in writing. Texts and Facebook posts, even with emoticons, are easily misread.

Another part of upright speech is honesty. “But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.” (Matt 5:37) Upright speech includes such scrupulous honesty that nobody would ever question it, or demand an oath.

People have gotten to a point where they will believe a habitual liar over an honest politician. (Yes, there is such a thing, although maybe not to the point of upright speech at all times.) Isaiah demands that we be like Daniel, so upright that the only way they will catch us is by attacking our religion.

Turn away

Every coin has two sides, and so it is with self-improvement. It is not just enough to do good; sometimes you have to stop doing evil as well. Even if you don't do evil, the righteous man must also stop condoning evil. "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." (Edmund Burke)

We should identify sin. We should refuse to participate in sin. That does not mean we should provoke the sinner.

We are generally a people that like making a profit. This is especially true of Americans. Making money is considered a measure of a man's worth—a false measure, perhaps, but a common standard. God does not object to making money. What he objects to is the manner in which some make their money.

King Ahab wanted to expand his wealth. To do so meant obtaining a certain piece of land, even though God had forbidden the Israelites from transferring property outside of the family. Naboth knew the will of God, and refused to transfer his vineyard to Ahab. At the urging of his wife Isabella, Ahab had Naboth executed. That is when Ahab learned that the righteous man despises gain from oppression. Life for life was God's sentence on Ahab. (1 Kings 21) Then whose was the gain? Certainly not Ahab's.

The Law of Moses was full of prohibitions on taking bribes. Solomon said, "A wicked man taketh a bribe out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment." (Prov 17:23) The problem with bribes, besides the promotion of dishonesty, is that they blind one to the proper course. The whole point of a bribe is that one cannot win a case on merit, but must have his way anyway. A bribe is the ultimate expression of selfishness.

It is almost impossible to watch the news today and avoid hearing of violence. So instead of watching the news you choose to watch a movie, and get violence. Well, maybe playing a video game. No, more violence. The simple act of hearing often results in hearing of bloodshed. Isaiah, however, seems to imply not just the act of hearing, but rather intention. We think of a bloodthirsty mad as one who does the actual killing for joy, but sometimes it is also the one who goes out of his way to hear about bloodshed. The old news adage, "if it bleeds it leads," acknowledges that people are a bloodthirsty lot. God, on the other hand, would rather that we be men of peace. Killing may sometimes be a necessary (and even God-approved) evil, but it should not be our first priority.

Isaiah considered seeing evil as bad as hearing of it. Sometimes we can listen to the gossip about someone who died, but it is worse to stand around and watch it happen. Nor is this phrase to be interpreted that we should just look away from evil. Shutting our eyes while evil happens is merely another way of condoning it. Saul did not stone Stephen, but he held the cloaks of those who did. He regretted not turning his eyes from evil for the rest of his life, apparently. Shutting your eyes from seeing evil may involve speaking up against it, in all its forms. That includes the evil of people who hide a lack of love behind claims of not condoning sin. That includes the evil of hateful speech and actions. It may even include the evil of standing by, like Saul.

The reward

When one follows righteousness and turns away from sin, there is a reward. The one thing everybody

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wants is security: security in self, security from want, security in status. God knows this, and that is just what he promises those who follow in his paths.

In Hong Kong years ago, as in many places, the higher you live on the mountain the greater your status. The rich and powerful lived high on Victoria Peak. The average person lived on the coast or the lowlands. The poor lived, sometimes, on the water. In ancient Jerusalem the Temple held the highest position, but the king lived only slightly lower. When God promises that his followers will "dwell on high," he is promising security in status. Maybe not always in the eyes of men, but certainly in God's eyes.

For security of person he promises the "stronghold of the rocks." The root meaning is a place in the rocks from which a hunter can safely await his prey. For the fans of my cousins on "Duck Dynasty" this could mean that God will keep you safe in his duck blind.

And security from want? God promises bread and water. Today that may not mean much, but for travelers in desert places that meant everything. Milk and honey may have symbolized good times, but bread and water are basics of sustenance.

God keeps his righteous people. All we have to do is walk positively, and turn negatively. Self-improvement is really relying on God-improvement.

Undocumented Aliens

There is a lot said these days in the United States about illegal (or undocumented, if you will) aliens. Most people agree there is a problem, they just disagree about how to deal with it. In New Mexico it is compounded by another adjective: illegal, undocumented, or extraterrestrial. It seems that alien issues have plagued mankind throughout history.

Among the first recorded laws about aliens (the earthly kind) can be found in *Torah*. "Also you shall not oppress an alien, for you know the heart of an alien, seeing you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Ex 23:9) Other laws in history have been less favorable. (The Israelites apparently had no immigration laws, and therefore no illegal immigration.)

Some people take the opportunity to point out that unless we are of First Nations descent, we are all aliens in America. Whether it is a valid argument or not, it is not original. Paul was one of the first to use the "we are all aliens" argument.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight. (Col 1:21-22)

This was not the only time he used this concept. Not surprisingly to those that know the parallels between Colossians and Ephesians, he said much the same to the church in Ephesus.

That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye

who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:12-13)

There are aliens who illegally claim citizenship. That has been the big issue in the United States. Some aliens who have not been admitted to the country legally are (sometimes fraudulently) receiving benefits reserved for citizens, such as healthcare or suffrage. States that issue drivers licenses to non-citizens have been tasked with making the distinction between those people and American citizens.

In God's kingdom, those who wrongly claim citizenship, even those that incorrectly think they have been naturalized, may appear to receive the benefits of citizenship while in this life. After this life, however, they may find that their alien status will finally catch up with them.

How could one think they have citizenship when they really do not? There are several ways. Some have been convinced that everyone is a citizen. They believe that God is so loving that he will not punish anyone, so everyone will spend all or part of eternity in His presence. They don't realize that God's love demands punishment for sin because it would be unfair to those who choose to obey to give the same status to those that do not. Others have been misinformed about the naturalization ceremony. "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal 3:27) Others just want to wear the name without making any effort at becoming citizens.

It is our obligation to treat aliens and citizens with the same respect. God will make their status known soon enough. Since we were all aliens, we should not oppress those who are aliens indeed.

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