

Editorial: The Standards Expected

I wonder whether you recognise the following quotation:-

“...a serious failure to observe not just the high standards expected of those working at the heart of Government but also of the standards expected of the entire British population at the time.”¹

In this editorial, I want to think, from a biblical perspective, about the standards that are expected – primarily by God Himself, and then by our fellow human beings. These standards are not limited to public servants, nor to the population of a particular country; neither do they change with time. ‘So,’ you may ask, ‘what are the standards that God expects? Let’s reflect on that.

The standards God requires of everyone

These are found in what’s known in the Bible as ‘the law’. Put simply, they are set out in the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1-17). They are also in each of our consciences. While outward conformity to many of the requirements may seem straightforward, genuine compliance is another matter entirely. For example, do I really have no other gods before the LORD? Do I love Him with all my heart? And who can claim never to have coveted anything that is his neighbour’s?

A great problem

There is, needless to say, nothing too strict, and nothing unfair, about God’s requirements. We all recognise that they are right, and we want everyone else to comply. The problem is with us. Here’s what the Bible says:-

“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

You maybe think that God will accept you on the basis of your attempts to keep His law. But the Bible states unequivocally:-

“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20).

¹ The words are from paragraph ii of the ‘General findings’ of a Cabinet Office report published on 31 January 2022, and written by Sue Gray.

A gracious provision

God could, in perfect righteousness, have abandoned us to our fate. However, rather than do that, He has, very mercifully, laid a righteous basis upon which we can be accepted:-

“ ... the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:24-26, NKJV).

Are you depending on this provision, or are attempting to be justified (i.e. declared righteous) in God’s sight by some other method?

The standards God requires of His people

Everyone who is justified in God’s sight is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). The Holy Spirit provides us with the power to behave the way God wants (Romans 8:4,12-13). In fact, we are exhorted to “walk worthy of God” (1. Thess. 2:12). A high standard, indeed!

Reasons for attaining the standards

As we have already stated, God expects such behaviour in His redeemed people. That in itself is reason enough. However, let’s consider some further relevant verses, which go into more detail:-

“let your conduct² be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries...” (Philippians 1:27-28, NKJV).

“That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

“... walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3).

² The Greek word carries the thought of the fulfilment of duties as a citizen of a city.

In addition to these very positive exhortations, we need to bear in mind that we will experience divine chastening to develop holiness in us (Heb. 12:6-11). Moreover, if we depart from God's standards, not only will He be grieved, but so too will our fellow believers (see 2 Cor. 2:3-5 for an example). There is yet another important aspect to be remembered: the perception of unbelievers, and how substandard behaviour by Christians will cause them to speak against God and His word. Attention is drawn to this danger in 1 Tim. 6:1 (where the context is the workplace, and the standards relate to 'servants'), and in Titus 2:4-5 (where the setting is the family, and the standards relate to wives).

The Remedy if we fail to attain the standards

Failure is clearly undesirable, and to be avoided. We can see this when John writes, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not" (1 John 2:1). He goes on: "And if any man sin" – a recognition that failure may occasionally occur – "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2). In the previous chapter, he writes: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).