

What Do the Righteous Look Like?

When the righteous [tsaddiqim] prosper, the city rejoices.

PROVERBS 11:10

A central premise of this book is that the average middle-class (or wealthier) Christian in America has been blessed with much from God—skills, wealth, opportunity, vocational position, education, influence, networks. We are, in short, the prospering. The purpose of all these blessings is simple to state and difficult to live: we are blessed to be a blessing. Our generous heavenly Father desires us to deploy our time, talents and treasure to offer others foretastes of the coming kingdom. Those who do so are called the *tsaddiqim*, the righteous. What we saw from examples in Michael Lindsay's book, though, is that it is possible to be the prospering without being the *tsaddiqim*.

Clearly, living as the *tsaddiqim* isn't easy. It requires tremendous effort and intentionality. More importantly, it requires power from God's Holy Spirit. It also requires understanding what a *tsaddiq* looks like.

But it *is* possible.

In this chapter, we'll examine the characteristics of the righteousness of the *tsaddiqim*.¹ And, since this book is mainly about our work lives, we'll focus especially on what it means to be the *tsaddiqim* in the context of our vocations.

THE *TsADDIQIM*

The Hebrew word *tsaddiq* (“righteous”) and its plural, *tsaddiqim*, are used two hundred times in the Old Testament.² They appear frequently in Psalms (fifty times) and Proverbs (sixty-six times). Bible translators try to capture their meanings by offering the English words *just* and *lawful*, and by referring to varying kinds of righteousness—in government, in one’s conduct and character, and in the justice of one’s cause. Theologian N. T. Wright said, “The basic meaning of ‘righteousness’ . . . denotes not so much the abstract idea of justice or virtue, as right standing and consequent right behaviour, within a community.”³

While these are handles for beginning to grasp what God means by *righteous*, they can feel a bit abstract. In studying the biblical scholarship on this concept, I’ve found that it is helpful to see righteousness as expressing itself in three dimensions or directions: up, in and out (see table 2.1 below).

Table 2.1. What Righteousness Looks Like at Work

Dimension of Righteousness	Characteristics	Work Implications
UP	<p>Godward orientation</p> <p>Humility</p> <p>Eternal perspective</p>	<p>*Work for God’s glory, not self-fulfillment</p> <p>*Eschew workaholism</p> <p>*Set boundaries on institutional loyalty</p> <p>*Embrace functional, daily dependence on the Spirit</p> <p>*Recognize God as the audience</p> <p>*Value today’s work as participating in the new creation</p>
IN	<p>Personal holiness</p> <p>Fruit of the Spirit</p> <p>Openhandedness</p> <p>Gut-level compassion for the hurting</p>	<p>*Not cheating, stealing, lying</p> <p>*Sexual purity with coworkers</p> <p>*Grace-based relationships</p> <p>*Generosity toward others; eschewing materialism and self-indulgence</p> <p>*Proactive “seeing” of others’ needs</p>
OUT	<p>Social justice</p>	<p>*Bettering conditions for workers</p> <p>*Promoting just relations with customers, suppliers and shareholders</p> <p>*Being a good corporate neighbor/citizen</p> <p>*Encouraging transformation within one’s institution</p> <p>*Encouraging social reform within one’s field</p>

By *up* I mean that “vertical” dimension of righteousness that involves our reverent worship of and humble dependence on God. By *in* I mean the state of our hearts: the internal characteristics of righteousness captured by the phrase “purity in heart” and expressed through personal righteousness (what the wisdom literature calls “clean hands”). By *out* I mean the social dimensions of righteousness, that part of righteousness involving our interactions with our neighbors near and far. This *comprehensive* expression of righteousness marks the *tsaddiqim*. As Tim Keller explained,

Biblical righteousness is inevitably social, because it is about relationships. When most modern people see the word “righteousness” in the Bible, they tend to think of it in terms of private morality, such as sexual chastity or diligence in prayer and Bible study. But in the Bible *tzadeqah* refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts *all* relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity.⁴

UP

The *tsaddiqim* live Godward. That is, the central orientation of their life is toward God. They eschew every idolatry, always seeking to give God (and nothing and no one else) his rightful place. And their Godward stance makes them people of prayer, because “being near to God is what the righteous seek more than anything else.”⁵

The *tsaddiqim* are deeply humble. They look “up” and affirm that God is the Creator and they are the creatures. They acknowledge him as the source of all life and breath, not kidding themselves that they have “made it” themselves by their own efforts. They join the psalmist in singing, “It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves” (Ps 100:3 NASB). They recognize that they belong to God, not to themselves (1 Cor 6:19-20). Their fundamental orientation in life is not toward self-fulfillment, but toward God’s glory.

The Godward orientation of the *tsaddiqim* also means that they have an eternal perspective. They seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). Their time horizon includes both this age and the age to come.

Applications to our work lives. This aspect of righteousness suggests several implications for vocational stewardship. First, this “vertical” righteousness means that we affirm that the purpose of life is glorifying God, not self. That is enormously relevant, practical and countercultural in our

workaday world, since at the very core of most modern “career counseling” is devotion to self-fulfillment. For the Christ-follower, self-fulfillment is not the ultimate goal. Instead, as scholar Douglas Schuurman explained, “Vocation is first of all about serving God through serving the neighbor.”⁶ This does not mean, as we will see in future chapters, that God is indifferent to our joy at work. Nor does it mean that it is illegitimate to explore how God has uniquely made us as we choose a career. It does mean that we are called to resist the modern assumption that personal happiness and satisfaction are the highest and most important criteria when considering vocational decisions.

Second, a Godward orientation means that in stewarding their vocations, the *tsaddiqim* do not fall into idolizing their jobs or the organizations they work for. Perhaps the most visible expression of this is that the *tsaddiqim* are not workaholics. They seek to draw their primary identity not from their work, but from their relationship with God. Their Godward orientation helps them remember to be faithful to *all* the various callings he has placed on their lives in addition to their work, such as family relationships, parenting responsibilities, service roles within the church, and duties to community and nation.

Not idolizing work also means that the *tsaddiqim* seek discernment about the limits of their loyalties to their employer. When their organizations order them to pursue actions that exclusively benefit the firm to the harm of others, they pause. In our very complex modern economic system built on competition, navigating these waters is undoubtedly very difficult. Consider these situations:

- the engineer who is asked to “cut corners” to save the firm money—and he realizes that doing so could bring harm to consumers or the firm’s own workers
- the company litigator who is asked to sue a competitor, but knows that the suit is based on biased or incomplete information about the other firm
- the accountant who is pressured to “massage the numbers” in ways that make the company’s performance appear better than it is—and realizes that this will mislead investors

In each of these examples, the employee is asked to put the employer’s

interest above all other interests, breaking the foundational law of love of neighbor. In such circumstances, loyalty to God and his law must prevail over institutional loyalty.

Third, this vertical dimension of righteousness means that we seek to do our work in active, functional, daily reliance on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The *tsaddiqim* practice God's presence in the midst of their labors. They are humble. They admit their creaturely limitations and thus seek regularly to invite the Father's heavenly wisdom and the Spirit's guidance. They understand the folly of leaning on their own understanding and look instead to the instruction of God's Word (Prov 3:5). They believe that Christ is alive and risen and working in the world, and say to him, "Lord, please use me through my work for your purposes. Let me know what you would have me do, and grant me the courage and strength to do it."

Relatedly, the *tsaddiqim* do their work "heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men" (Col 3:23 NASB). That is, they know their audience. They offer up their work—whatever it involves, whether great tasks or small—in worship to God. They resist slavish devotion to people-pleasing. They can handle the pain of being passed over for rightful recognition, because they are focused primarily on their heavenly Father's affirmation, not their boss's.

Finally, because the righteous are fundamentally Godward in their orientation, they view their work in eschatological terms. We will examine this idea in greater depth in chapter four. For now, suffice it to say that the *tsaddiqim* have an eternal perspective. They are confident in God's promise to make everything new (Rev 21:5). They trust that in their work they participate in the new creation, even if that very glorious idea is somewhat mysterious to them. Theologian Miroslav Volf refers to this as a pneumatological theology of work. In *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, he writes, "Through the Spirit, God is already working in history, using human actions to create provisional states of affairs that anticipate the new creation in a real way."⁷

The *tsaddiqim* trust that their labors are not in vain, because they believe that there is continuity between the present and future eschatological eras (even while they admit that the nature of this continuity is often inscrutable). They embrace what Volf calls the *transformatio mundi* paradigm—the belief that the final judgment is a refining fire, transforming

but not completely destroying the present creation. From this eschatological paradigm, they celebrate the significance of human work and see it as a matter of “cooperation with God.”⁸

IN

The second aspect of righteousness concerns the state of our own hearts. This aspect involves both right personal conduct and, importantly, holy motivations and dispositions. The righteous seek not only to *act* rightly but also to *be* right inside. Scholar Jerome Creach points to Psalms 15 and 24 in this regard. These texts convey the idea of righteousness as a matter of both “clean hands” and a “pure heart.”⁹

The God to whom we are directed is the One who commands us, “Be holy as I am holy.” This holiness takes a variety of expressions. For example, the righteous hate all that is false (Prov 13:5). They have a “blameless” walk, speak the truth from their hearts and fear the Lord (Ps 15). They delight in God’s law (Ps 1:2). They keep themselves sexually pure (Ezek 18:6). They do not swear deceitfully (Ps 24:4). They maintain just weights and balances; they do not defraud (Lev 19:36).

Personal righteousness also involves the zealous pursuit of “putting off” the old self and “putting on” the new self that is spoken of in Colossians 3. The *tsaddiqim* seek to walk in the Spirit and yield themselves to the Spirit’s work (Rom 8). They ask God to nurture within them the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). They seek to put to death the misdeeds of the old self—to mortify the flesh with its greed, pride, lust and selfishness.

The righteous are also deeply grateful people who understand that all they are and all they have comes from God. They affirm his ownership over all things and know that only from the Father comes breath itself and everything needful for life. Their hearts are not full of pride rooted in their own accomplishments or their own hard work. They realize that the wealth they’ve accumulated or the successes they’ve achieved have largely resulted from God’s providence. Nor is there a grasping orientation in their hearts. Instead, they recognize that they own nothing; rather, they are stewards of God’s resources. Consequently, they are joyfully openhanded.

The internal dimension of righteousness also involves the disposition of

our hearts toward compassion and mercy. Many Pharisees in Jesus' day were considered righteous by their fellow citizens because of the multiple disciplines they followed. The Pharisees sought to be honest, faithful to religious requirements and ethical. Yet sometimes Jesus found their personal righteousness lacking because their hearts were cold. To be pure in heart, from Jesus' perspective, is not only to be a person who "keeps her nose clean." The pure in heart have *warm* hearts, ready to feel others' pain and to respond with compassion.

This compassion is described well in Proverbs 29:7: "The righteous *care about* justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (emphasis added). This "caring about" the poor is actually a radical commitment not well captured by English translations, which tend to weaken and mask the true import of the statement. In the original Hebrew, the verb translated "care about" is *ya-vah*, and it is intense. The same term is translated in Genesis as "to know"—as in "Adam knew Eve" and Eve became pregnant. So, when the righteous "care about" justice for the poor, it means they are intensely passionate to see justice done for the poor. Their concern is deep, intimate and heartfelt.

Jesus displays this kind of intense caring about the poor in the feeding of the five thousand. In the accounts of this miracle in Matthew 14 and Mark 6, we are told that when Jesus sees the crowd, he "has compassion" on them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. He proceeds to both heal them and feed them.

The words translated into English as "felt compassion" or "had pity" don't quite do justice to the original language. The Greek word for "felt compassion" is *splagchnizomai*, meaning "to have the bowels yearn" with pity. *Splagchnizomai* refers to "innards" or "guts." As Jesus looks out at the hungry crowds, he experiences "gut-wrenching" compassion. This Greek word is used twelve times in the New Testament. Eleven of them refer to Jesus being "moved with compassion" and then feeding or healing or teaching. The twelfth usage is from the parable of the prodigal son and is used of the father, who sees his son a long way off, "is moved with compassion," and starts running toward him.

The Hebrew term that matches up with *splagchnizomai*'s notion of "guts" or "innards" is *qereb*. It is found in Leviticus where God describes how the Israelites are to make the various animal sacrifices. Without get-

ting into too many gory details, suffice it to say that the priests followed various instructions concerning what to do with the different parts of the animals—heads, tails and “inwards” (or entrails or guts). For our purposes here, the main point is this: it’s the guts that are put on the altar as the sacrifice.

A preacher once offered this formula for describing Jesus’ caring ministry: Jesus sees suffering and is punched in his guts with deep compassion, and this provokes him to make a sacrificial offering.

To be the *tsaddiqim*, then, means to care about justice for the poor—to care with a deep, gut-level compassion that energizes personal, sacrificial commitment.

Applications to our work lives. Most of the teaching on the integration of faith and work emphasizes the importance of cultivating personal righteousness in the context of our daily labor. That’s understandable given the considerable ethical perils of the contemporary workplace. The Fall has affected both our work itself and the environment in which we do it. Because of the Fall, work has become toilsome and sometimes feels futile. Because of the Fall, both we Christians and our nonbelieving coworkers are sinners. The modern workplace, as authors Doug Sherman and William Hendricks write in *Your Work Matters to God*, “is a jungle.”¹⁰

God has called us into the world, including the fallen world of work. There, the wheat and the tares are growing up together (Mt 13:25). Christians sometimes find themselves confronted by coworkers whose lives are dissipated or bosses who are dishonest. They may face pressure to lie to customers or vendors or shareholders. They may work in an environment where everyone cheats on their expense reports. They may face sexual temptations from handsome coworkers.

In this setting, the *tsaddiqim* seek to heed the apostle Paul’s call to “shine like stars in the universe” through their intentional, diligent, prayerful pursuit of holiness (Phil 2:15). The righteous ask God to help them maintain “clean hands” on the job by refusing to lie, cheat, steal or engage in a workplace sexual affair.

Congregational leaders need to recognize the jungle that their members confront and encourage their flock by reminding them of God’s redemptive power. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has defeated both

the guilt and the power of sin. His indwelling Spirit makes possible growth in personal righteousness. Pastors need to remind their people that they can indeed, through Christ's power, be different kinds of workers than the nonbelievers around them.

Sometimes coworkers or supervisors are hostile to faith. Believers face ridicule or persecution on the job. Other times believers simply work with people whose failings may include gossiping, laziness or mean-spiritedness. In such a context, the righteous cry out to God to display the fruit of his Spirit in them. They ask God to impart in them gentleness, patience, kindness and self-control. They seek to return good for evil and to offer grace to difficult coworkers.

Other times, the greatest challenges on the job relate less to persecution and trial than to the temptations that follow success. As believers enjoy promotions, the worldly rewards of labor increase. Salaries go up. Titles and offices become more prestigious. Such earthly joys can beguile congregants' hearts, dulling resistance to pride, consumerism and self-indulgence. Congregational leaders must warn their flock of these dangers.

Indeed, pastors should remind their people that believers who face hostility on the job because of their faith may actually have it easier than those who enjoy promotions and success. The former are well aware of how the atmosphere around them is dangerous and how it requires countercultural behavior and attitudes. In the midst of their trials and distresses, they likely find it easy to remember to pray, study Scripture and seek the intercessions of others. After all, they have a sense of their desperate need of these means of grace.

The latter, by contrast, may be lulled into complacency. Success, recognition, privileges, financial rewards—the Christian who receives all this at work may be easily enchanted. Such pleasurable things get a hold on us, and we don't want to lose them. We begin justifying moral compromises that enable us to retain the goodies to which we've grown accustomed. Pastors should remind their members that professionals enjoying success on the job may need an even greater discipline than those who are persecuted at work.

We've seen that the call of personal righteousness involves not only a pure heart, but also a warm heart. Cultivating a heart marked by *splagchnizomai*—that gut-wrenching compassion for those in need—involves

much prayer. Believers need to look to the Spirit to grow them in this area just as he grows them in honesty or sexual purity. In addition to prayer, though, the *tsaddiqim* seek to nurture this kind of heart by intentionally seeking exposure to people in need.

Many middle- and upper-middle-class Christians live in economically homogenous neighborhoods, worship at churches with little class or ethnic diversity, and work most closely with people from the same class. Without some exposure and engagement with the oppressed, the hungry or the impoverished, we can easily lack the heartfelt, *splagchnizomai* compassion of Jesus. Culturally distanced from the poor, we become emotionally distant as well. And sometimes we're not even conscious of it.

The *tsaddiqim*, by contrast, pursue the common good out of a keen awareness of the cries of those at the bottom. Knowing God is the true owner of all they possess, they are willing to share their resources and talents for the rejoicing of the whole community. They take intentional steps to acquaint themselves with the needs of their neighbors. Some of those neighbors may be people within their workplaces, such as the night-time janitor who's struggling to make it as a single mom with three kids and two minimum-wage jobs. Other times neighbors in need may be people affected by the *tsaddiq's* employer (such as families living close to a company factory that is polluting the environment or poor people in the developing world who are hired by the firm at unfair wages). And still other neighbors are simply the down and out of one's city who have no interaction with the employer.

In any of these cases, the point is that the righteous educate themselves about the conditions of the vulnerable. They ask questions about the firm's engagements abroad; they are informed of their local community's news; they make a point of knowing the names of the service workers in their companies. They provide some mental and emotional space for their neighbors' realities. They make room in their hearts for their neighbors' struggles; they allow some of their neighbors' pain to take up residence there.

In a moment, we'll look at what social righteousness is and how we can do justice in and through our work on behalf of those in need. The internal work of cultivating a tender, compassionate heart precedes and makes possible such concrete actions.¹¹

OUT

So far we've examined the vertical and internal/personal aspects of righteousness. Also mandatory for the *tsaddiqim* is what we might call social righteousness. Creach describes this social aspect of righteousness eloquently:

The righteous act in concert with God's will for the shalom of the community. . . . The activity of the righteous shows they align themselves with God's desire to create community well-being, and their activity is part of God's creative, justice-establishing efforts.¹²

Social righteousness is about how we treat our neighbors near and far. It is about how vertical love toward God is expressed in horizontal love toward the world he has made and the people he has created. In short, the righteousness of the *tsaddiqim* involves both personal moral purity and the "attempt to make God's justice a reality where they live."¹³

Both the wisdom literature and the prophetic literature tell us much about the contours of social righteousness. The righteous do not slander or defraud others (Ps 15:3). They do not take advantage of others in tough economic times by lending at interest (Ezek 18:8). Instead they give generously (Ps 112:9). Unlike the wicked, they eschew violence (Ps 11:5). They refuse to accept bribes against the innocent (Ps 15:5). They "do justice" (Mic 6:8) and defend the cause of the widow (Is 1:17). Courageously, they even "snatch" victims of oppression from their oppressor's very jaws (Job 29:17). In contrast to the wicked, they eschew greed and lavish living that is indifferent to the plight of the poor.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the *tsaddiqim* promote justice and shalom. They thread their lives into those painful places where the social fabric is unraveling. As Tim Keller argues,

What [this] means then is that you must not just be a thread next to the other threads. When you see other people falling out of the [social] fabric, people who don't have the goods, . . . who are being told to fend for themselves and don't have the power to do it, it's your job, it's your responsibility, to get involved with them. And that's what it means to thread yourself. We don't want to be involved—we're so busy. But [we] have to. We have to thread ourselves, our time, our money, our love, our effort, into the lives of people who are weaker than we.¹⁴

Social righteousness is nurtured when we look “out” at our neighbors near and far and deliberately consider how to advance their good.

Applications to our work lives. Part of looking out involves considering the needs of those among whom we work. First, we simply have to *see* them. We have to make room in our hearts for caring about others. From this heart of compassion springs tangible action. If we have attained a position of authority, we may be able to use our influence to better the working conditions of others. Or we may be in a position to provide job or learning opportunities for people outside our organization. (In chapter nine, we will consider a wide variety of additional ways to seek the common good of coworkers.)

Looking “out” also involves considering the needs of all the stakeholders in our work, such as vendors, customers, partners, investors or neighbors (people living in the communities where our employing organization’s facilities are). The call to do justice is applicable in all these relationships. Thus our vocational stewardship may include seizing opportunities to go the extra mile on behalf of customers. Or it may involve using our voice within the organization to mitigate possible harm in the community, such as environmental pollution.

For web designer Justin Kitch, looking out involved creative thinking about how his firm—Homestead, an IT company that helped clients build their own websites and online stores—could promote community well-being. Kitch blessed his Bay Area community by permitting his employees to take two hours per week, or one full day per month, to volunteer in a local nonprofit of their choosing—and paid them for their hours. Since the company had a significant number of employees, this practice provided a few full-time workers annually for free to the nonprofit community.¹⁵ Additionally, the corporate foundation Kitch established when he first launched Homestead has donated tens of thousands of dollars to local charities.

Finally, looking out means taking seriously our potential role in encouraging institutional transformation. This begins within our own workplace. Consider, for example, the ways insurance agent Bruce Copeland sought to live out the call to social righteousness throughout his career.¹⁶ In 1963, Copeland was vice president of a Philadelphia-based insurance company. Concerned by the fact that the company was so male dominated and hier-

archical, he used his position and influence to encourage institutional changes within the firm.

Copeland gathered several other managers who shared his views. This team began to promote the rights of women and minorities within the firm. It sponsored a meeting for all of the company's female employees to ask them what needed changing. Fifty women attended the session and came up with five proposals. Copeland was able to adopt three of them immediately and one later. He also brought in trainers who promoted a more participatory, less hierarchical management style. This new approach to management was then implemented in all the divisions under Copeland's charge.

Copeland also sought to influence his firm's decisions regarding where the company invested its money. His role as vice president afforded him a seat at the table with the corporation's senior officers. He advocated vigorously for disinvestment of the firm's stock assets from South Africa, which at that time was still under apartheid. He also tried to get company leaders to earmark a certain percentage of a construction contract for the firm's large new office building to be sourced from minority-owned firms.

Institutional transformation includes actions that can move an entire industry to higher standards of quality or safety or financial transparency or energy efficiency or racial diversity—or other social goods. For an architect, for example, this might involve serving on a commission that reviews the credentialing procedures of architects and encouraging curricular reforms leading to more architecture students being trained in green building practices. For the advertising executive, it could mean establishing internal company guidelines that protect female models from exploitation and then convening a meeting of peers from other firms to seek new industry-wide protocols along the same lines.

For screenwriter Barbara Nicolosi, it has involved starting a nonprofit, Act One, with the mission of creating “a community of Christian professionals for the entertainment industry who are committed to artistry, professionalism, meaning, and prayer so that through their lives and work they may be witnesses of Christ and the Truth to their fellow artists and to the global culture.”¹⁷ Act One offers two-week courses and longer training programs that help Christians grow in screenwriting and producing skills. About two hundred students have completed the program and about half

are working in the industry. In an interview with *Godspy*, Nicolosi explained her vision for this creative enterprise:

Our long-term strategy is to emphasize training people rather than producing projects. We're trying to establish an alternative to the top secular film schools. Going to one of those schools is still a tremendous advantage, but their underlying worldview is radically nihilistic. As a Christian, you can learn the craft in those places but everything you believe will be ridiculed by your professors. With Act One, they see that it's possible to live a holy, Christian life and master the craft and create excellent content at the same time. And they've created friendships and Christian community that can sustain them when they enter the industry.¹⁸

Act One graduates are now better equipped to seed themes of creation, Fall and redemption into the entertainment industry.

Or consider the example of orthopedic surgeon Barry Sorrells from Little Rock, Arkansas. He has used his influence, experience and network to bring about a modest but meaningful change in the preparation medical students receive. "I got to thinking about my profession," Barry explains, "and everybody coming out of medical school says, 'I felt well prepared in medicine, but I didn't really feel prepared for the world.'"¹⁹

With support from his pastor at Fellowship Bible Church, Barry designed an intensive course that offers brief instruction to medical students on such practical matters as budgeting, first-time home buying and managing credit cards. He brought his idea to the professors at the University of Arkansas medical school, and they embraced it "whole-heartedly."

The highlight of Barry's LifeSkills Institute is a panel discussion called "Wisdom from Medical Practice." He explains that six or seven "gray-haired physicians, well known and well respected in the community" speak with the students for a few hours about life. The goal is to help the future doctors avoid making some of the mistakes they made. The older physicians talk openly about their failings in balancing family and work and about lost marriages due to workaholism or infidelity. From 2001 to 2009, Barry's weeklong LifeSkills Institute was a required part of the curriculum for medical students in their final year at the University of Arkansas.²⁰

TWO OBJECTIONS

The Bible's description of righteousness is daunting. I can imagine the

material presented thus far provoking at least two reactions. The first is suspicion: that I ought not to be exhorting us to become the *tsaddiqim*, because that is a call to works-righteousness. The second is despair or skepticism arising from the thought *This is an unattainable standard. How can anyone in today's world come close?*

The call to righteousness in this book in no way replaces the doctrine of full reliance on Christ and his righteousness. For one thing, the exhortation here is not to perfection. No matter how much we grow in becoming righteous as depicted in the preceding pages, we still desperately need Jesus and the daily, indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. For another, the call here is not about achieving some level of moral uprightness that puts us in a position of deserving God's favor. God's gift of salvation through Christ's righteousness is free, unearned and utterly gracious.

But this doctrine of God's unmerited favor toward us is not meant to lead us into a passive life, a life unchanged, a life dismissive of the call to grow in holiness. We are saved to be Christ's disciples. And, as Dallas Willard says, "The disciple is the one who, intent on becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in his 'faith and practice,' systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end."²¹ Those terms—*systematically* and *progressively*—sound like hard work. They are. And that is perfectly legitimate and orthodox. Why? Because there is a great difference between *earning* and *effort*. There is no place for the former in the Christian life. But it's a different story for the latter. "We must act," Willard says. "Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort."²²

Regarding the second objection, I'll certainly admit that living as a *tsaddiq* today is very difficult. But it's not a pipedream. I know, because I've met many *tsaddiqim* face-to-face. Let me introduce you to one.

A MODERN-DAY *TSADDIQ*

Perry Bigelow, a Chicago homebuilder, is not perfect. He's humble and knows he needs to rely daily on the mercies of Christ. But I think he is a *tsaddiq* (though he gets embarrassed when I tell him that). He was the kingdom-oriented businessman I was hoping to find in Lindsay's *Faith in the Halls of Power*, but didn't. Perry's pursuit of righteousness in all three of the dimensions we've been discussing—up, in and out—shapes his vocational stewardship.

Perry is the founder of Bigelow Homes, a suburban homebuilding company just outside Chicago. (His son, Jamie, now heads the firm.) Perry's integration of faith and work began from the deep-set conviction that he is the steward, not owner, of his business. The orientation of his whole life, including his professional life, is Godward. Over many years, Perry has prayed, studied Scripture and read thoughtful Christian scholars in order to develop a God-honoring approach to his stewardship of all the gifts and assets he has received.

Based on this foundational desire to please and honor God in and through his work, Perry seeks to obey biblical standards of morality and to imitate Christ's character. This commitment to personal righteousness is expressed concretely in the strict ethics the Bigelow Homes firm expects of itself and its employees. Company policy is straightforward: "We will never knowingly lie to each other, a home purchaser, a supplier or subcontractor, or government official. We place a high premium on personal integrity."²³

Personal righteousness is also expressed through Perry's desire to imitate the servant-leadership of Jesus. During the years he actively led the firm, that servant heart expressed itself in his management style. Humbly recognizing the limits of his own giftedness and knowledge, he deliberately hired colleagues who possessed strengths that he lacked. Then he placed those people in responsibility over various functional areas of the business. He pursued a consensual management style and emphasized interdependence and collaboration, giving leaders space to exercise their gifts.

In addition to modeling Christ's servanthood, Perry has treated his employees compassionately. The homebuilding industry is notorious for cyclical booms and busts. That means that most construction workers find steady employment a chimera. Bigelow Homes takes seriously a responsibility to keep its labor force on the job. It does so by refusing to overreach in the good times and eschewing the temptations to become big for the sake of bigness. "We aim for careful, sustainable growth," Perry says.²⁴ This has allowed the firm to go through all but two of Chicago's innumerable housing cycles without laying off anyone—while competitors were shedding as much as 50 percent of their workforce.²⁵

Perry and his team have also thought carefully and creatively about the

product their business offers. They've advanced two kingdom virtues through the way Bigelow homes are designed. The first is community. Perry is aware of the trend in American culture toward hyper-individualism. His love for the biblical value of *koinonia* (fellowship and co-participation) gets infused in the design of the communities Bigelow Homes builds. These designs aim for "a balance between privacy and neighborliness."²⁶ For example, Bigelow builds extra-wide sidewalks and multiple "commons" spaces for spontaneous interaction and puts large front porches on each home.

Perry has also advanced the kingdom virtue of sustainability through his work. Through product and design innovations, Bigelow homes are extremely energy efficient. In fact, the company guarantees that homeowners won't have to spend more than four hundred dollars per year on heating bills—in Chicago! "Our innovation in energy efficiency is a direct result of our great respect for God's creation," Perry explains, "and a belief that we should preserve as much of it as we can for our children's children."²⁷

Perry and his team have thought wisely not only about their product design, but also about the ways their company's assets—networks, expertise, technical prowess, managerial talent and financial resources—can be deployed to assist inner-city housing ministries. So, for several years, Bigelow Homes has partnered with nonprofits as they work to provide quality, energy-efficient housing for low-income working people in Chicago.²⁸

Perry has also sought to design and build neighborhoods that bless the local community in practical, tangible ways. For example, knowing the challenges that vital but modestly remunerated professionals like teachers, police officers and firemen sometime face in finding affordable homes where they serve, Bigelow Homes deliberately builds "workforce housing." These are family-friendly homes with affordable per-square-foot prices.

Bigelow also follows an unconventional model of planning neighborhoods—one marked by deliberate product diversity and what Perry calls "compact development." This approach blesses the school district and the local municipality. Here's how: By offering diverse styles of homes with prices ranging from \$150,000 to \$350,000, Bigelow subdivisions create demographic diversity. Singles, retirees and families all live in a community. This demographic diversity spins off positive cash flow for the local school district because the total number of students in the subdivision is

less than it would be following conventional, suburban-sprawl building practices.²⁹ Moreover, Bigelow's compact development leads to "high assessed value per acre and less infrastructure." As Perry explains, this is the recipe for municipalities to make a profit from property taxes.³⁰

In short, Bigelow Homes' design-building practices challenge the suburban homebuilding industry's conventional wisdom. Perry's company has shown the industry that it is possible to do well by doing good. It has demonstrated that it is possible to build attractive, energy-efficient and yet affordable homes. It has proven that compact development that strengthens a community's tax base can be designed to produce an aesthetically attractive and neighborly subdivision. Through Perry's writings and work with municipal officials, he is bringing this message to the powers that be, advocating reforms in the industry toward the more sustainable approaches Bigelow Homes has pioneered.

Perry Bigelow has stewarded his vocational power to rejoice the city. He has blessed his employees through his compassionate and thoughtful business model. He has brought joy to his customers—many of them first-time homebuyers, many of them working families needing a safe, neighborly, affordable community to live in. He has also blessed the city of Aurora by building a subdivision that contributes to the local tax base, generating revenue for schools and municipal services. And he has blessed future generations by taking the biblical value of sustainability seriously enough to let it shape his product design.

And all the while, Perry has been humble and approachable—a regular guy. He's not a "super saint." His life shows that it is indeed possible to be a *tsaddiq* in modern America.

CONCLUSION: THE *TSADDIQIM* AND THE *ECCLESIA*

In ancient Israel, important public business was conducted by the "assembly at the gate." There, in what we today call "the public square," societal leaders oversaw judicial proceedings. Deuteronomy 21–22 gave instructions to the Israelites about coming to the "elders of the town" to settle family and legal issues. In Ruth 4, we read of Boaz negotiating at the gate to become Ruth's kinsman-redeemer. In 2 Samuel 15 we read of Israelites coming to the gate "for justice."

Ideally, these elders were to be holy, reputable, faithful men. Proverbs

24:7 tells us that there was no place for a fool in the assembly at the gate. The prophet Amos indicated the righteousness of the elders by describing a wicked person as one who hates “him who reproves in the gate” (Amos 5:10 NASB). Job, the Old Testament character whom God himself called upright, was one of these elders at the gate (see Job 29:7). In other words, the assembly at the gate in the Old Testament was an assembly of the *tsaddiqim*. And that matters for us today. Here’s why.

When the apostle Paul sought a word to use for “church,” he chose the Greek word *ecclesia*. This is a notable selection because other Greek words were available to denote the idea of assemblies or gatherings. *Ecclesia* was the word specifically used in the Septuagint (the Old Testament translated into Greek) to mean the assembly at the public gate—that is, the assembly of the *tsaddiqim*.³¹ This means that Paul’s word for “church” denotes an assembly of the people who decide matters of common welfare, the people charged to look out for the commonwealth.

For Paul, church was not meant to be a body of people concerned only with their own fellowship. The church was never to extract itself from the cares of the larger community, to form a “holy huddle.” No. The church—the *ecclesia*, the assembly at the gate—is to give itself for the life and flourishing of the community. The church, by definition, is missional.

The church is supposed to be a collection of the *tsaddiqim*—people of deep personal piety and intense passion for the kingdom of God. The church is a fellowship of those committed to stewarding their prosperity for the common good, of people who think creatively and strategically about how to deploy their talents to advance foretastes of the kingdom. This is an incredibly exciting and inspirational vision.

Sadly, though, our churches often fall short. In the chapters ahead, we’ll try to understand why.