

RESTITUTION

PAUL the Apostle said: "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16).

A conscience void of offence toward God means a conscience void of offence toward man as well. God will forgive no man until he is willing, so far as it lies within his power, to make right every wrong against others. Restitution, or a straightening up of the past, is therefore absolutely necessary to, and an essential part of, true repentance.

The primary definition of the word "restitution" is the act of restoring; specifically, restoration of anything to its rightful owner; act of giving an equivalent for loss or damage. Throughout the Bible we find the principle of restitution tied in very closely with the act of sinful man's returning from his sinful ways to serve the true and living God. Often when a man sins against God, other people suffer as the result of that sin. When a man sins against his neighbor, he sins against God in the same act, because one of God's commandments has been broken. God willingly forgives the sins committed against Him when they are repented of; but He requires man to make amends to any person he has injured or wronged by his sinning.

Required by the Law

The teaching of the Word of God on this subject is clear. Restitution was a strict requirement of the Old Testament Law: "If a soul sin, and commit a trespass against the LORD, and lie unto his neighbour in that which was delivered him to keep, or in fellowship [marginal reading: 'Or, in dealing'], or in a thing taken away by violence, or hath deceived his neighbour; or have found that which was lost, and lieth concerning it, and sweareth falsely; in any of all these that a man doeth, sinning therein: then it shall be, because he hath sinned, and is guilty, that he shall restore that which he took violently away, or the thing which he hath deceitfully gotten, or that which was delivered him to keep, or the lost thing which he found, or all that about which he hath sworn falsely; he shall even restore it in the principal, and shall add the fifth part more thereto, and give it unto him to whom it appertaineth, in the day of his trespass offering" (Leviticus 6:2-5). The transgressor's "trespass offering" was accepted only on condition of his making restitution.

Taught by the Prophets

What was commanded in the Law was preached and enforced by the prophets also. "When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; if the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die" (Ezekiel 33:14, 15).

Ezekiel lived several centuries after the Law was given, and at a period when Israel had woefully backslidden from God; but we do not find this staunch prophet of God modifying, in the least degree, the terms of the Law. The transgressor is still under the necessity of making restitution in order to be restored to the favor of God.

The eternal God, whose ways are equal, has decreed that the wicked man shall not die for his wickedness in the day that he turns from his wickedness to do that which is lawful and right in the sight of the Lord. To show the sincerity of his repentance, however, the formerly wicked man is required to "restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed."

Taught by Jesus

Neither is this requirement set aside nor in any wise abridged with the passing away of the Law and the ushering in of the dispensation of Grace, as some would argue. Grace covers no wrongs that can be made right. Jesus

expressed Himself unmistakably on the subject of restitution: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23, 24). It is necessary for one to pause in his devotions to God in order to be reconciled to a brother, rather than try to worship Him with guilt upon the heart. ' All Wrongs Rectified

In the passages quoted, sufficient Scripture has been cited to prove unmistakably the Biblical teaching on the subject of restitution. But, supposing the Bible were silent on the matter, would not one's own conscience tell him that restitution is absolutely necessary if he would find favor with God? Would God receive a man who had made no attempt to straighten up a crooked past? No one would have any confidence in a religion that did not impel a man to pay his just debts, take back the things he had stolen, confess his lies, and uncover his crimes.

Zaccheus, a hardheaded tax gatherer, and undoubtedly accustomed to driving shrewd bargains, probably knew little about the Scriptures; but no sooner did he come into contact with the Son of God and feel the thrill of a new life coursing through his being, than he stood and said, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Luke 19:8). He was willing to go clear beyond the requirements of the Law which demanded but a fifth more. No man who has been born again is questioning the necessity of restitution. He is more than eager to make amends in any way he can for the wrongs of the past. Restitution is as much a part of the Gospel as conversion.

As to the nature of these restitutions, they include not only matters where money is involved, as fraud, theft, dishonest gains, and unpaid bills, but also lies, slanderous and false reports, unjust criticisms, or any act wherein others have been injured in word or deed. God will hold a man to these conditions of restitution, but He will furnish the needed strength and grace to meet these conditions. The man who feels real conviction for sin will long for deliverance at any price, and he will not feel that restitution is an undue hardship. He will be willing to do whatever is necessary to get relief from the burden of sin: It is useless to talk about loving the Master with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength unless that love has caused the old life to pass away and has caused restitution to be made for all past misdeeds.

Restitution includes the straightening up of wrongs against corporations or companies, or violations of the laws of the land. Neither are we exempt from making restitution because the party injured may be ignorant of the wrong. This fact does not alter the situation in the least in the sight of God, for "all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." Nor can we be governed by the civil statutes in making our restitution.

Moral Obligations

The laws of man permit many things absolutely contrary to the law of God. We may keep well within the limits of the civil law and yet miss the mark entirely so far as God is concerned. The civil code, for example, provides a time limit for certain classes of debts and obligations, after which they are "outlawed." But no debts are "outlawed" with God. Time cannot cancel moral obligations. The statutes contain a bankruptcy act by which a man's entire indebtedness may be cancelled. But no petitions in bankruptcy are recognized in the courts of Heaven.

The law of man says nothing against driving shrewd bargains and taking advantage of the other fellow when he is in a corner; but the law of God requires a just recompense to every man, an honest return for every service. An employer, according to law, could have taken advantage of the scarcity of work and underpaid his employees, but if that employer ever gets right with God, he will pay those employees, so far as it lies within his power, what is due them.

Many just obligations are escaped and many wrongs go unpunished in the so-called administration of justice in this world through the technicalities of the law and "slips" in the cumbersome machinery of the courts. But it is well to remember that there will be no "legal technicalities" to impede justice in that final court of appeal.

Wrongs will either be made right in this world or they will be faced in the world to come. We had better face them here, where mercy seasons justice, where we have an "advocate with the Father," a "Counsellor" who never lost a case, who can go before us and soften the hearts of those to whom we confess, One who can help us make the crooked places straight.

Saved on Condition

Restitution is usually considered at the time of salvation, because God will forgive no man's sins until that man is willing, so far as it lies within his power, to make right every wrong that he has committed against others. God opens the heart of the sinner and shows him the sins of his past life. In some instances it has required years to make all the restitution that God showed in a few minutes of time, but God will not deprive a man of salvation all those years if he faithfully promises God that the restitutions will be made. Zacchaeus experienced salvation before one restitution was made, but he knew they had to be made and he promised that they would be made. As he kept his word, he also kept his salvation.

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea , and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matthew 3:1-3).