

PROSTITUTING DAUGHTER-IN-LAW CALLED “RIGHTEOUS”

Take you average righteous person and you’re probably talking about someone who obeys the law, someone who lives up to a high standard of morality. A goody-goody. One of those holier-than-thou types who never let their hair down and have a good time.

At least that’s what most people think of when they hear the word “righteous.” They think of a person who is all but sinless.

Or they think of people who try to act like they never make any mistakes, the kind who make the rest of us feel uncomfortably guilty.

The standards of such righteous ones seem to be so high that few of us ordinary folks have any chance of attaining thereunto.

“Attaining thereunto,” my foot! The trouble with this whole business is that we’ve been conned into thinking that there’s some divinely appointed legal standard which humans are expected to strive for.

On the contrary, the Bible’s ideas about “righteousness” or “justice” (the two words are synonymous; they translate the same Hebrew term) are refreshingly skewed. Biblical righteousness is to be viewed from a different angle.

Especially in the Jewish scriptures it’s not as case of trying to live up to an all but unattainable norm. Rather, it’s a matter of being faithful to a relationship.

Put two people together in a relationship—husband and wife, for example, or parents and children, or a king and his people—and see whether they fulfill the obligations of that union.

That’s how to tell if they’re “righteous,” by whether or not they do what’s right in their particular relationship. The funny thing is that some times the strangest acts end up being labeled righteous.

Here’s an extreme case, in which a woman who prostituted herself earned the title “righteous.” The incident involving Tamar and her father-in-law can be found in Genesis 38. The story goes like this:

The patriarch Judah chose a wife for his eldest son. Her name was Tamar. Their marriage was short-lived, however. For some unnamed reason, the son was so wicked that the Lord killed him.

Now in ancient times it was important that a man have children to carry on his name. So if

he died without any heirs, his brother was supposed to father a child by his widowed sister-in-law.

Accordingly, Judah instructed his second son to make Tamar pregnant. But son number two pulled out at the last minute without completing his familial duty. So the Lord killed him too.

Judah had a third son, but considering the bad luck he’d had with his two older boys in their relationships with Tamar, he wasn’t too anxious to send his youngest son in. So he talked her into going back to her father’s homestead and living as a widow.

Meanwhile, Judah’s own wife died. After an appropriate mourning period he made plans to check up on his sheep shearing business. When Tamar got wind of his plans, she dressed incognito as a prostitute, snuck out the back way, and set up shop on the road to the sheep-shearers.

When Judah came by he went in, got her pregnant, and left his personal seal and cane to guarantee that she would get her price—all without knowing who she really was. Before he could return with the promised payment, Tamar had hurried back home and resumed her widow’s weeds.

Now in those days any widowed woman who became pregnant (except under the conditions outlined above) was subject to the death penalty as an adulteress.

So two or three months after the incident on sheepshearer’s road, Tamar’s condition became so obvious that her father-in-law was required to call for her execution.

But as they led her to the stake, she produced the incriminating evidence. Judah had to admit that he was the father of his daughter-in-law’s child.

He had failed to live up to his obligations to provide a husband for Tamar, so she had fulfilled the traditions in her own way. When all was said and done, Judah was forced to acknowledge, “She is more righteous than I.”

That’s some story. Of course it was never intended to give an OK to prostitution. But it does illustrate an often-ignored side to the question of righteousness.

As far as the Bible is concerned, being righteous isn't a matter of living up to impossible ideals. It's more a matter of being faithful in your relationships.

In other words, what counts is not how good you are. It's how you treat other people. Treating other people right, that's what righteousness is all about.

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