

Grace for the Day

www.gracefortheday.org
Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

Is Righteousness Fungible?

By Robert Kaita

Many of us act as if righteousness in one aspect of our lives can somehow offset less than commendable behavior in another. What we do in public, for example, may justify how we are in private, and vice-versa. While we have a sense that this isn't right, it doesn't keep us from the temptation to think so.

Summertime is often when we do light reading, and I've been going through a book that my wife got for me at a fundraiser for our local library. It's called "Mission Compromised" by Oliver North. It's a decent fictionalized account that takes off from the very real Iran Contra Affair.

I bring this up not to pass judgment on the guilt or innocence of Oliver North, who was a key participant, or anybody else involved. Rather, what interests me, and is relevant to today's lesson, is that while the Iran Contra investigations were in full swing, I recall that much was made about North's piety.

I remember watching a "docudrama" on a major television network that showed North leading his family in

saying grace before a meal in a restaurant. The implication appeared to be that anything he did had to be right, at least to him, if not everybody else, because he was a committed Christian and a good family man. Here we have an example that suggests that his piety is fungible.

What is fungible? The somewhat legalistic definition is as follows: "Of such a kind or nature that one specimen or part may be used in place of another specimen or equal part in the satisfaction of an obligation."

We may want a relationship with God such that if we do an act of piety, he might return with a favor. When we were young, this could have been a promise to God to stop fighting with your siblings if you get good grades in school.

As we get older, it may take the more serious form of a commitment to be a more faithful churchgoer if a loved one is cured of a major illness. Another example might parallel the anecdote about Oliver North, where you couldn't have a less than honest income tax return because you tithed.

This popular, and often unsaid assumption among Christians can be

investigated by looking at the lives of very familiar people in the Bible.

Let us look first at the life of Moses. What do we recall about him? Is it Moses on the mountain with two stone tablets in the movie "The Ten Commandments"? We know Moses was born a Jew, but was kept from being killed as a baby by the cleverness of his mother and the kindness of an Egyptian princess.

Moses became a "Prince of Egypt" (Hollywood creeps in again), but had to flee after he murdered a cruel taskmaster. He saved the daughters of a priest of Midian, and marries one of them and began a quiet pastoral life. The Lord has other plans for him, and with the assistance of his brother Aaron, he was able to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage.

Moses has the prototypical "mountaintop experience" as he brings down the Law of God to the Israelites, but they hardly behave as God's chosen people. They are thus forced to wander for forty years, until all who were not obedient to God perished in the desert.

If righteousness, faithfulness, or piety were fungible, you'd think that on balance, Moses had as much right as anybody else to enter the Promised Land. He was the unmistakable leader of the Israelites, after all, and uniquely chosen by God to record the first five books of his Word.

We know, of course, that this was not to be. The reason is recorded in Deuteronomy 32:48-52. It is because

Moses "broke faith with God in the presence of the Israelites."

We can only imagine how painful it must have been for Moses to write this down. It would have been one thing if God condemned him for the murder of the Egyptian. He never repented of this act, and fled only when his crime was discovered.

Instead, Moses was taken to task for his disobedience. Surely this must be open to negotiation. He could argue that this one wrong could be absolved by all the good he did, or in some way, that his merits and demerits should be fungible. All he did for the Israelites should easily outweigh that one slip at the waters of Meribah Kadesh.

How God treated Moses should give us pause. On the one hand, he could have been punished, for the very words revealed to him by God was a capital offense. I am not suggesting by any means that God takes sins lightly, but he was merciful in not giving Moses, or us for that matter, what we really deserve. God does, however, demand obedience, and it is a lesson to be learned by Moses and all who came after him.

We see this when we look at later famous people in the Bible. What do we know about King David? He had a very auspicious start as the slayer of Goliath. I recall the act depicted in Sunday School pictures. What is not as often mentioned was his less than honorable behavior with Bathsheba, and his downright criminal responsibility for the death of her husband Uriah.

Then comes King Solomon. What do we remember about him? We still use the expression “wisdom of Solomon.” As a ruler of peace, it was he, rather than his father King David, who could build a temple that even Jesus Christ used as the paragon of splendor.

Solomon never murdered anybody, but in I Kings 11:6, we read that “he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.” The fate of Solomon’s kingdom is sealed in I Kings 11:9-11, but the passage ends with a note of mercy in I Kings 11:12-13. Here again, God does not take sin lightly, but appreciates the obedience of a repentant murderer over one whose “heart has turned away” from him.

To conclude, there’s no better an encapsulation of what we’ve discussed than in Christ’s depiction of righteousness.

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:* ¹⁰ *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’*

¹³ *“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’*

¹⁴ *“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before*

God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

It was not the piety of the Pharisee that could qualify him for righteousness. Instead it was the repentance of the tax-collector that brought him justification before God.

20070731



Please pass this on
so that many more can be blessed.

Want a **FREE** subscription?
Send an email to subscribe@gracefortheworld.org
with Subject: SUBSCRIBE

Listen to Rev. Peter’s **sermons** and find **other articles**
in www.gracefortheworld.org

Wish to support this ministry? Have any questions?
Write to: admin@gracefortheworld.org

Dr. Robert Kaita is a professor at the Princeton University. He is a physicist attached to the Plasma Physics Lab. He is a capable advocate that the world is created by intelligent design, that it is a viable scientific option. He is a scientist, not a theologian. He has a deep love and commitment to God and to the Bible. In addition to Christian love and other virtues, Kaita is deeply committed to reaching others with the Gospel message at the university campus.