

Ecclesiastes 7:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise:
why shouldest thou destroy thyself?

Analysis

Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise (אַל־תִּהְיֶה צַדִּיק, al-tehi tsaddiq harbeh ve'al-titchakam yoter)—This paradoxical command has troubled interpreters. Does Solomon counsel moderation in righteousness? No—the issue is self-righteousness and hyper-scrupulosity. 'Over much' (harbeh yoter) suggests excess beyond God's requirements, creating burdensome legalism. The Pharisees exemplified this, adding traditions that obscured God's intent (Matthew 23:4, 23-24).

Why shouldest thou destroy thyself? (לָמָּה תִּשְׁחַמֵּם, lamah tishomem)—The verb tishomem means 'bring ruin upon yourself' or 'be desolated.' Self-righteous legalism destroys through pride, judgmentalism, and burden-bearing God never intended. Jesus warned against those who 'strain out a gnat and swallow a camel' (Matthew 23:24). The verse warns against religious performance that exceeds biblical requirement while missing biblical intention. True wisdom humbly fears God; false wisdom trusts in self-achieved righteousness.

Historical Context

Jewish tradition developed extensive halakhic (legal) interpretations, many beneficial but some burdensome. Jesus confronted Sabbath regulations that prohibited healing (Mark 3:1-6) and ceremonial washings that replaced heart obedience (Mark 7:1-13). Paul fought legalists who added circumcision to grace (Galatians 5:1-6). Church history includes monastic extremes, ascetic excesses,

and legalistic movements that equated godliness with man-made restrictions. The verse doesn't oppose genuine righteousness (Matthew 5:20, Philippians 3:8-9) but self-manufactured religiosity. The Reformers recovered this biblical balance: justified by faith alone, not works-righteousness. The 'already/not yet' tension means Christians pursue holiness (1 Peter 1:15-16) while acknowledging ongoing struggle (Romans 7:14-25) and complete dependence on grace.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. Where might you be practicing 'over righteousness'—creating standards beyond Scripture that burden yourself or judge others?
2. How do you balance pursuing holiness with avoiding self-righteous pride or legalistic performance?

Interlinear Text

אַל	תִּהְיֶה י	צַדִּיק	הַרְבֵּה ה	וְאַל	תִּתְחַכֵּם
H408	H1961	Be not righteous	over much	H408	wise
		H6662	H7235		H2449
	יֹתֵר	לְמָה	תִּשְׁוֹמֵם:		
	neither make thyself over	H4100	why shouldst thou destroy		
	H3148		H8074		

Additional Cross-References

Romans 12:3 (Parallel theme): For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to

think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

Proverbs 25:16 (Parallel theme): Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it.

Ecclesiastes 12:12 (Parallel theme): And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

Colossians 2:18 (Parallel theme): Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

Colossians 2:23 (Parallel theme): Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

1 Corinthians 3:18 (Parallel theme): Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.

Genesis 3:6 (Parallel theme): And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

Luke 18:12 (Parallel theme): I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

Job 28:28 (Parallel theme): And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

Proverbs 23:4 (Parallel theme): Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom.