

Idealism: Is It Really Ideal?

Idealism. It sounds like a good thing. Even the word itself, so often paired with "youthful", and contrasted with "cynicism", is attractive.

An ideal is held up as a model of perfection, something to be imitated, an example to inspire us to our highest attainments. There is nothing wrong with the ideal.

But adding "ism" after it tells a different story. Idealism, as applied to human thinking, means more than believing in, and attempting to follow an ideal model. What is usually implied is the belief that human beings embody the ideal. This is where we get into trouble.

If we had an ideal human leader, it would not be of great concern what form our government took. Monarchy? No problem. Absolute monarchy? With an ideal king, we would be fine. Democracy? Sure, the people are ideal too. We all want what is best for the majority. Communism? Wonderful! Share and share alike. But the best and most efficient form of government -- with our ideal leader, of course -- would be dictatorship. This leader would always have the people's good at heart, and no one would stand in his way of bringing about that good.

But if you read the newspapers even occasionally, you are probably already convinced that dictatorship is not a good idea.

In its over 225 years of existence, the United States has never had a Chairman Mao, an Ayatollah Khomeini, or a Saddam Hussein. How have we managed to avoid such a power problem? It is tempting to think that it is because our character is a little better, or because we are more civilized, or even because we are Christian. But the sad truth is, none of these things elevates our basic nature above that of anyone else in the world. We will have to look elsewhere for the answer.

John Steele Gordon, who writes on business and economics for American Heritage magazine, has this to say about our system of government: "by dividing power among three branches, the authors of the Constitution intended each branch to guard against the other two becoming too powerful." (Strong Investor, Spring 2003). Why was this necessary? It certainly slows down the action. Things would be done far more quickly if we didn't

have to contend with this bureaucracy. Yet our Founding Fathers knew it was necessary. "They reasoned, with a profound understanding of human nature, that...politicians would always seek more power..." He is talking about our politicians, remember, not those half a world away. Human nature is quite comfortably entrenched right here on American soil, in American hearts, and in American politics.

When Jeremiah said "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9), he wasn't just talking about Saddam Hussein. "The heart" means the heart of man -- every one of us.

Even the Apostle Paul said that "sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it, slew me" (Rom 7:11). Where was that deceitful sin? In his own heart. "For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing" (v. 18). Try as he would, Paul could not get rid of that "law of sin which is in my members" (v.23): human nature.

Well, what can we do about it? Our first job is to recognize it, as did our Founding Fathers when they drew up our constitution. We can be helped, but we must first recognize that we need help.

The Jews of Paul's day, like all humans, were prone to thinking that they were just a little better than others which, in their minds, accounted for the favor that God had shown them. And we, like them, have to recognize that it just isn't so.

"What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin" (Rom 3:9). We have the further declaration that "there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way. They have together become unprofitable. There is none who does good, no, not one" (Rom 3:10-12, NKJV). Quite a litany of man's failure in the righteousness arena.

This being the case, what hope of righteousness does anyone have? We can look to Abraham, who "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). There may be none righteous, but God "justifies the ungodly," such as Abraham -- and ourselves -- because our "faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom 4:5 NKJV).

Since "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), there would be no hope except for this fact that "God reckons righteousness apart from works" (Rom4:6).

We are fortunate to live under a constitution which was deliberately constructed to weather the force of human nature. But are "we" (America) better than "they" (fill in the blank)? We must ask, with Paul "Where then is boasting?". And answer with him, "It is excluded" (Rom 3:27 NAS).

Not our righteousness, but God's, is demonstrated by His grace. It is "for the demonstration , I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 2:26 NAS).

Dennis and Vicki Martin