

CHRISTIAN MORALITY and ETHICS

For The Maturing Teenager

Moral and ethical behavior is rooted in our perception of who we are in the sight of God and in the sight of men. Therefore, morality and ethics are deeply affected by our spiritual image of ourselves, but they are not equally affected.

Ethics is our behavior in the sight of men. It may or may not coincide with the laws of men; and though our behavior may be legal and ethical within a given culture, it may still violate God's laws. Morality, on the other hand, is our behavior in the sight of God. It too may or may not coincide with the laws of men, but it must always coincide with the laws of God.

For the Christian, God's law must govern our behavior in the sight of men because it is a testimony to all men about the grace of God. When it conflicts with the laws of men, God's law must rule our behavior no matter what consequences may flow from it.

Underlying both ethics and morality is the concept that we are morally or ethically correct when we BEHAVE correctly. Knowing what is correct without actually changing the way we behave is worthless knowledge.

We must be so convicted of the rightness of our thinking that it leads to a change in our behavior, or it becomes the fundamental MOTIVE behind our behavior. Right behavior for the wrong motive is as bad as wrong behavior. But that is only part of what right behavior is about.

Right behavior depends on right thinking. Right thinking depends on our interpretation of our circumstances, and on our understanding of our responsibilities in those circumstances.

Moral and ethical behavior is an expression of the way we value competing interests in our lives. It is therefore the most important indicator we have of who we think we are and what we think the relationship is between ourselves and everyone else.

SELF-IMAGE: Who am I?

Self-image (not self-esteem) is the driving force behind everything we think, say and do. That's a pretty powerful and absolute statement to make, but it is absolutely true. The most important thing for you as a teen-ager to accept is that you are just beginning to grasp who you really are. That is hard enough for an adult to grasp, but for the teen-ager other complications need to be considered:

1. The physical image is changing
2. The emotional image is changing
3. The intellectual image is changing
4. The social image is changing
5. The cultural image is changing
6. The international image is changing

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Puberty describes the physical changes taking place in us during our formative years. Adolescence describes our attempt to adapt to those changes. If we live in a constant state of change from ages 11 to 21, then where is our point of reference, our anchor? Which rules don't change, and what behavior is right and wrong?

In adjusting to adulthood, the Bible does not acknowledge a separate standard of behavior for adolescence as distinct from adulthood. The Bible is a lighthouse in a stormy sea that says our SPIRITUAL image is as eternal as God. That image does not change, and it is not relative. If you need to hold onto anything in life, it is your identity as a child of God, dearly loved, dearly bought, and dearly provided for.

Once you accept that precept, right thinking opens up a whole treasure chest of ideas that we will explore this semester:

1. Our capacity to analyze data
2. Our motives for our behavior
3. Our biases in choosing rules
4. Our capacity for self-control
5. Our incentives for right behavior
6. Our need for self-preservation
7. Our tendency to be swayed by others
8. Our choice of a rule-book

There is a biblical framework that describes our ability to learn correct behavior and then to behave correctly. It says that:

1. We begin by LEARNING rules that we obey blindly.
2. We progress by understanding when to APPLY the rules.
3. We gain UNDERSTANDING of the *basis* and *purpose* of rules.
4. Finally, we gain wisdom in CREATING *appropriate* new rules; that means we are free from the rules because we have learned the underlying principles that generate rules.

We move from rules to principles as we become morally mature. That is, we move from spiritual milk toward spiritual meat. We are eating the meat of obedience when our behavior is actually based on what we believe to be correct guiding principles (also known as sound doctrine in the Bible). Psychologists have re-discovered these biblical concepts. A renowned psychologist, Jean Piaget, says our progression from milk to meat goes like this by age-group:

Age 1-2	No rules: just activity, undisciplined, no self-control
Age 2-6	Mimic rules: we learn rules for our own use and discipline
Age 5-6	Worship rules: we treat them as sacred and force others to obey
Age 7-10	Compete for honors: we compare our obedience with others
Age 11-12	Abstract reasoning: we learn to create rules and consent to obey

OBEDIENCE vs. FREEDOM: RESPONSIBILITY

When it comes time to nourish ourselves on the meat of obedience, we need to do more than merely obey rules. God gave Adam free will in the Garden of Eden so that he would behave willingly and responsibly. If it were not so, he would have made Adam a robot instead of a man. God wanted willing trust and love from Adam, not blind obedience offered grudgingly and

resentfully. Therefore he gave Adam freedom to obey or not to obey. Obedience without freedom is slavery. God did not create Adam to be his slave.

Freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will: I want what I want when I want it. This is a description of a newborn baby, and it is a description of sin in all its shame. God did not create Adam to be a sinner, even though that is what he became. Obedience restrains freedom, and freedom makes obedience noble. Obedience follows blindly while freedom has open eyes. Obedience acts without asking questions while freedom always asks what the purpose is. Obedience has its hands tied while freedom is creative. In obedience Man conforms to the 10 commandments, and in freedom he creates his own commandments.

But it is in responsibility that both freedom and obedience are realized and tension and balance are found between them. It is in responsibility that we make new commandments like the Constitution or the laws of a state in which the principles of the 10 commandments find their counterparts in particular circumstances. Christ said that even the 10 were based on only 2, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, strength and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

THE JUSTICE SYSTEM: Bell-weather of Ethics and Morality

Rules for rules' sake are rather silly. Therefore we tend to respect rules that seem fair and uphold our sense of justice. The others we sneer at and consider superstition (step on a crack, break your mother's back), or else we resist them and fall into rebellion.

Justice is an abstract concept that is shaped by what we want to achieve by applying a penalty for some action or inaction. We expect murder to have a stiffer penalty than shop-lifting because we want to uphold the value of life more than the value of property. Ethics and morality determine our system of justice. They define our values and therefore the penalties for disobedience.

By the same token, our system of justice governs our willingness to obey that system. The loss of ethics and morality leads to a loss of justice. When justice disappears, so does law and order. When chaos reigns in our streets we have to conclude that ethics and morality are either dead or they have been re-defined.

The L.A. riots were caused in part by our attempt to redefine right and wrong, a process that has been ongoing since the 1960's. A small but very powerful segment of our society is trying to change the behavioral rules on which the society was originally based. They are meeting stiff resistance from another more traditional segment of the society.

A system of laws that is not based on a generally accepted system of ethics and morality is unjust by definition. When any society is split in its fundamental understanding of who Man is and who God is, there will be massive and unavoidable conflict. Notice we are back to the concept of SELF-IMAGE. Let's see if we can outline what components we have in our self-image.

SOLITUDE vs. LONELINESS

At an early age we define our self-image only by our relationship to other people. We are sons and daughters, students and friends. We want to examine our relationships to others in greater detail later. What we want to know is who we are when no one else is around. This insight into our identity only comes with maturity. In fact, some people never find out even after a lifetime of searching.

When others who are important to us are absent for a short time or perhaps forever as when death separates us, the impact on our life caused by their absence is enormous. We respond in many ways, some constructive, some destructive. We may choose to withdraw from any close relationships because the mere possibility of being separated is so painful that we won't take the risk. We may grieve for a time, and then slowly recover enough to pursue new relationships. We may become so angry that we poison all other relationships without really meaning to.

The absence or loss of close relationships in our life leads to what we know as loneliness: it is the feeling of being unfulfilled, unwanted, unloved or unlovable. It is very different from solitude in which we find fulfillment and contentment in being alone. In solitude we seek to know our true identity in the absence of others, and ideally in the presence of God. Solitude is where we find contemplation and prayer. Solitude is confident and willful separation from others, not out of fear, but out of a desire for insight and knowledge. In solitude we seek after something, we don't run away from it.

In solitude, the issue of ethics is irrelevant. The issue of morality is very relevant. In solitude we sit in the sight of God without barriers and without excuses. Everything we think and believe in is out in the open for us to confront with God as our witness. It is the place where Truth is found. We will return to solitude at the end of the semester. For the moment we are going to return to relationships with others as God has mandated them to be.

THE FOUR MANDATES OF GOD

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who wrote a text on "Ethics" before World War II began. He wrote another text on the "Cost of Discipleship." Finally he wrote a series of commentaries on commitment that you can still read today called "Letters from Prison." He was so convicted of the rightness of his thinking that he left the safety of England to return to his native Germany to oppose the Hitler's Nazi regime. He did so knowing there was a real probability that he would never live through the ordeal. In the end, he was hanged with his entire family the day before the war ended. His testimony of the love of Jesus Christ was as profound on his jailers as that of Paul was nearly 2000 years earlier. Bonhoeffer believed that God has mandated four fundamental areas of our life that everyone must encounter in pursuit of ethical and moral behavior: Family, Labor, Government, and the Church.

He was a bit unsure of just where culture (science, economics, art, sport, etc.) fit into this plan, but he did not consider it a mandate. Culture is more a description of how the four work together than an independent mandate. Because God has mandated all four of these, there can be no retreating from the secular into the spiritual, no escape from the world into the church. But neither are we to be devoted to the world over and above the Church.

Each of these areas of our life has a specific function and its function should not supersede the function of any other area. When it does, conflict and rebellion will be the natural consequence. When the government tells the church how to worship, or the church tells the government how to rule, there is a natural animosity that leads to the infringement of God's plan for our lives. This was well understood by the founding fathers of the United States. If we are to understand ethical and moral behavior in the context of each area, then we must understand the function of each.

THE FUNCTION OF THE FAMILY - In marriage man and woman become one in the sight of God, just as Christ becomes one with the Church, his bride. God gives this union the blessing of fruitfulness, the generation of new life. Thus man participates in the act of Creation through marriage. Through marriage men are brought into being for the glorification and the service of Jesus Christ and for the increase of his kingdom. This means marriage is not only a matter of producing children, but also of educating them to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

THE FUNCTION OF LABOR - Labor was mandated by God even before the Fall. Adam was to dress and keep the Garden of Eden (Gen.2:15). After the Fall labor remains a mandate of divine discipline and grace (Gen.3:17-19). In the sweat of his brow man wrests his nourishment from the soil, and the range of human labor soon embraces everything from agriculture and economy to science and art (Gen.4:17ff.). Through labor we assign value to what is produced. Labor, instituted in the Paradise, is also participation in the act of Creation. Creativity is what distinguishes Man from the animals. It is his very nature to be creative because he is made in the image of God and God is creative by his nature as well. People in the marketplace must be permitted to be creative or else we damage their very soul by denying them a fundamental right to create. Assembly lines are inherently wrong when the repetitive tasks have no creative component to them and no sense of accomplishment results.

THE FUNCTION OF GOVERNMENT - The presence of government presupposes the existence of marriage and labor. In the world in which it rules, government already finds two mandates in which God exercises his creative power and it is therefore dependent on them for creativity. Government is NOT creative in itself. Government cannot produce life or values. It preserves what has been created, maintaining it in the order which has been assigned to it by God (i.e. the function it serves). It protects it by making law and it secures respect for this law by the force of the sword.

In this way the government is not the performer but the witness and guarantor of marriage. The government is not the doer of labor, but it is the inspector and supervisor of labor. It may determine the direction in which labor must move, such as construction of roads and dams. However, government must never try to become the driving force behind labor or it will cripple its own mandate. That is why communism fell in Eastern Europe after 70 years and why socialism will fall in Western Europe within our lifetime. Communism and Socialism can only succeed when everyone has nothing. Does that mean that America has a better government, perhaps a biblically based one? Not even close. The form of the government is not what is at issue. The relatively best form of government is that form which does these things:

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1. Recognizes God as the source of its authority
2. Recognizes its responsibility to its people as God's steward
3. Maintains its power by
 - a. strict maintenance of outward justice
 - b. acknowledging the sanctity of family and of labor
 - c. permits the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ
4. Promotes mutual confidence with its people by
 - a. just action
 - b. truthful speech

THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH - The Church is the place in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is evidenced and proclaimed. The Church is the place where testimony and serious thought are given to God's reconciliation of the world with himself in Christ. The only way the Church can defend her territory is by fighting not for the territory, but for the salvation of the world. Otherwise the Church becomes a religious society which fights for its own interests at the expense of God's interests and the need of the world for salvation.

The first demand made of those who belong to the Church is not that they should be something in themselves (like an organization or fasting fanatics) but that they should be witnesses to Jesus Christ before the world. If this testimony ceases to be given, then it is a sign of the inner corruption of the congregation, just as the absence of fruit is the sign of the decay of the tree. The Church exists and remains in the world for the benefit of the world not for the benefit of the Church. Bonhoeffer puts it this way, "Everything would be ruined if one were to try to reserve Christ for the Church and to allow the world only some kind of law."

SYNTHESIS and AUTHORITY - Choosing between competing values

For us as individuals, we are at the same time laborers, partners in marriage, and loyal subjects of some government so that all three areas overlap. If we are Christians, then we also bring the Church to bear on all three simultaneously. There is not supposed to be conflict or competition between the functions, but somehow or other there always is. That's because we live in a fallen world.

When we attempt to determine which function is the controlling function in any given circumstance, we wind up making quite a few judgment calls about who is in charge even within a single function. Who calls the shots in the marriage: the husband or the wife? Who runs the government: the Congress, the President or the Court? Who gives the orders at work: the boss or the union official? Who runs the Church: the Pastor, the Elders or the Congregation? No single mandate is sufficient in itself. It cannot replace or claim lordship over the others. They are intended by God to be 'for' one another. It is a mutual admiration society. If that is not so, we suffer the consequences.

What we're really talking about here is authority. Who has the right to say what is right and wrong? Every time we try to determine authority we are put in the position of identifying who is superior and who is inferior. That goes against the grain of most Americans today. We have become an Egalitarian society in which everyone is equal and no one has authority. This is

quite a change for us from when the country was first founded. We have never bent a knee to a foreign king, but neither have we ever sneered at respect for authority as we do today. The Biblical approach says there must be a superior and inferior when it comes to authority. This is where we find answers to ethical questions of right and wrong. Someone must pronounce what is right and wrong, and that someone must be the one who is the rightful authority in the circumstance. No matter what your personal opinion is at the time, you must acknowledge and you must respect that authority. No easy task!

Here is a Biblical guideline for authority, superior vs. inferior:

1. it belongs to the old, not the young.
2. it belongs to the father, not the child.
3. it belongs to the master, not the slave.
4. it belongs to the teacher, not the student.
5. it belongs to the judge, not the accused.
6. it belongs to the ruler, not the subject.
7. it belongs to the preacher, not the parishioner

When God created Adam, he gave him permission to choose right from wrong and that permission carries on to us. God granted Adam freedom and that is what distinguishes the laws of men from the laws of God. God ordains freedom while Man demands obedience. When we find ourselves in conflict and we need to determine ethical and moral correctness, we need to find out whether we are permitted to speak to the issue (whether we have the freedom to choose), or whether someone else holds that authority. God does not demand that we obey some cut and dried set of rules. We are not to torment ourselves with whether we should fast, or how well we use our time or our money. God has not dropped a guilt-trip on us for disobedience. Instead he permits us to be ourselves in his sight.

Bonhoeffer says it well when he writes,

The self-tormenting and hopeless question regarding the purity of one's motives, the suspicious observation of oneself, the glaring and fatiguing light of incessant consciousness, all these have nothing to do with the commandment of God who grants liberty to live and to act...

Man does not permanently stand like Hercules at the crossroads. He is not everlastingly searching for the right decision. He is not always wearing himself out in a conflict of duties. He is not continually failing and beginning again...

Entirely without inner conflict he can do one thing and leave undone another thing which, according to theoretical ethics, is perhaps equally urgent.

Is this true? Have we really found this kind of freedom in Christ? It is the very reason Paul had to address the ethical guidelines being laid down by the Christian Jews. He speaks of Christian liberty and ethics in 1st Corinthians, 8th chapter:

Next is your question about eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. On this question everyone

feels that only his answer is the right one! But although being a "know-it-all" makes us feel important, what is really needed to build the church is love. If anyone thinks he knows all the answers, he is just showing his ignorance. but the person who truly loves God is the one who is open to God's knowledge. LB

Paul goes on to say that if you believe it is wrong, then for you it is indeed wrong, but if you are convinced it is not wrong, then it is not wrong. He fleshes out a principal of Scripture that says we are not to compare ourselves with others in the Church or in the world, but only with God's standard of behavior. Does that mean there are no rules? Not at all. But we must determine how they are to be applied based on the time, circumstances, participants and consequences. Only mature Christians should be taking this approach. That's why the preacher leads the parishioner and not the other way around. Bonhoeffer is not suspending the rules; he is merely repeating what Paul said about not following rules blindly.

In the Old Testament God put it like this, "Who is he trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? Those just weaned from their milk? Those just taken from the breast? For it is: do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule." From this we can gather that blind obedience to rules is for the infant in Christ, not the mature. But neither should we be quick to say we are so mature we do not need any rules.

CASE IN POINT: Telling the truth

From the time we learn to talk, we are commanded by our parents to tell the truth. It defines part of our relationship with them. Strictly speaking, their demand applies only within the family. And the demand for truthfulness is not two-way. The child cannot demand of the parents the same truthfulness that they demand of him. They are under no obligation to reveal everything that is hidden and secret. Their claim on the child and the child's claim on them is not the same.

This theme is a constant throughout life. We must take account of our relationships with others at each particular time we are determining ethical and moral behavior (where telling the truth is only one kind of behavior). We need to ask whether and in what way one person is entitled to demand truthful speech of another. Speech between parent and child, husband and wife, teacher and student, government and subject, friend and foe, friend and friend conveys different truth.

Telling the truth is therefore something which must be learned. This will sound very shocking to someone who thinks telling the truth is simply a matter of moral character. But morality and ethics cannot be detached from reality and consequently learning about reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action. Bonhoeffer tells us,

It is only the cynic who claims 'to speak the truth' at all times and in all places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth. He dons the halo of the fanatical devotee of truth who can make no allowance for human weaknesses; but in fact he is destroying the living truth between men. He wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs arrogantly at the devastation he has wrought and at the human weakness which 'cannot bear the truth.' He says truth is destructive and demands its victims, and he feels like a god above these feeble creatures and does not know that he is serving

Satan. There is a truth which is of Satan.

We usually define a lie as the conscious discrepancy between thought and speech. This isn't at all accurate. It would include an April Fool's joke. Joking isn't lying and the two shouldn't be equated. Sometimes we define a lie as a deliberate deception of someone else which leads to his injury. That isn't good enough either because it includes the necessary deception of an enemy in time of war. That would lend moral sanction to the lie and make what is inherently bad into something good. How then can we speak the Truth? By recognizing that

1. The one who prompts us to speak has the right to do so.
2. Our relationship to that person entitles us to speak.
3. The circumstances are appropriate to speaking.
4. The topic of our speech will accomplish the task for which we speak

If we speak without the right to speak, and without a reason to speak, then we become idle chatterers and we are roundly condemned by Scripture. For example, I may think someone is stupid, ugly, incapable or lacking in character, or I may think someone is wise, pretty, capable and sincere. But what I need to ask before I speak is whether I have the right to express that opinion, what occasion warrants expressing that opinion, and whether the person to whom I address that speech ought to hear it.

Truthfulness does not mean the disclosure of everything that exists. God himself made clothes for man to hide man's shame (Gen.3:21). This means that while man remains corrupt, many things in man are to remain concealed. If it is too late to eradicate evil, it is at least to be kept hidden.

Now we need to return to SOLITUDE to discuss discipline: how to control our tongue, mind, heart, body and actions. Here's the rule:

Discipline works best which is inwardly motivated, not outwardly enforced.

NOTE: I wrote this introductory lesson for my son, Gordon, when he was 14 years old. He was the only member of our church's youth group at the time. If it seems a bit adult, let me say that I never spoke down to my children. It was something that my mother taught me.