

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL ETHICS No. 2
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Review

What "ethics" refers to (human behavior and whether it is good or bad) and why we ought to be careful students of the Bible's ethical teaching. (We gave many reasons and that is important in itself. Too often Christian motivation, the reason for living a holy and righteous life, is reduced to but one thing or two, when, in fact, the Bible gives us many reasons. I did not even mention them all last Sunday night (e.g. heavenly rewards!). Love, together with gratitude, is the grand, overarching motive (so Paul's "therefores"), but God gives us many other reasons to be good, including our own self-interest (assurance; rewards both in this life and the next).

Tonight, I want to begin our first large section in this series of studies. We will call it "The Bible's Foundations for Ethics." How are we to discern right from wrong? What kind of guidance does God give us? If last week we gave a summary answer to the question: why ought we to live a righteous life? In the coming Sunday evenings we will consider the question: how do we know what a righteous life consists of, and, in particular, how to choose the good, the right way at any particular point of decision in our lives. The answer to that question is more complicated than you might at first suppose.

The problem is created by the fact that while certain matters are clear enough, others require the weighing of various factors, principles, instructions that we are given in Holy Scripture as well as careful attention to our own inner states. Let me give you an example.

Some ethical questions are like these:

- "Shall I sleep with my neighbor's wife?"
- "Shall I shoplift that car part that I need for a repair?"
- "Shall I spread a lie about someone whose reputation I envy?"

For a genuine Christian who desires to honor God and to do what the Lord has taught him is good and right, to answer such questions requires merely acquaintance with the rules of conduct clearly laid down in the Bible. Adultery, theft, and bearing false witness are all strictly forbidden by God.

But other ethical questions are not so straightforward?

- "What amount of money ought I to spend on my house or my clothes?"
- "What sort of movie may a Christian see and for what purpose may he see it?"
- "What is a work of necessity that may be done on the Sabbath day and what is not?"
- "What does the love of neighbor and the forgiveness of my enemy require of me in the case of neighborhood boys or continue to spray graffiti on my garage?"
- "How quickly ought church discipline be imposed on a young man who had married outside of the faith?"
- "To what degree ought alcoholism be considered an illness that shields a professing

Christian from the discipline of the church?"

"What are the obligations of a Christian woman to her marriage if her husband continues to beat her up?"

"How does one decide whether to home-school one's children, to place them in Christian schools, or to use the public schools?"

"Is it proper for Christians to use birth-control and to intend to prevent the conception of children?"

And so on. Very practical questions that will determine in the most practical ways what sort of life we live and whether our outward behavior will be comprehensively ethical, from a Christian point of view, or merely moral in a way that many unbelievers would as well accept.

The Bible doesn't directly address any of the above questions, as least not in the precise way in which I asked them. To find the right behavior, therefore, will require more than the citation of a biblical precept. It will require the identification of principles, a way of applying those principles to life questions that is also true to Holy Scripture, and, as we shall see, in many cases, it will require beyond that, an examination of motives, a weighing of equally plausible alternatives, biblically speaking, according to the demands of love, and the considered use of what we might call sound judgment. Christian ethics must be comprehensively biblical, but that means not that the Bible will provide us specific direction in all cases, but that, if we develop a biblical mind about right and wrong, we shall have all that we need to make the right choice.

Is this not what the Scripture itself says (2 Tim. 3:16-17): "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped **for every good work.**" (That last is, of course, "ethics.")

So what we have before us is the task of constructing from Holy Scripture a method for deriving its ethical counsel. And, as the Scripture itself teaches us to do, we will begin with the simple and advance to the more complicated.

And so we begin with the Law of God.

Remember the remark that our Lord made to the Pharisees to the effect that they had concentrated on the minor obligations of holiness (the tithing of mint, dill, and cummin) and had neglected the "weightier matters of the Law (Torah)" which he said were "justice, mercy, and faithfulness." [Matt. 23:23-24]

Now I want merely to point out the fact that our Savior considered justice, mercy, and faithfulness (wouldn't we agree, wouldn't most men agree, that those three words are a fine summary of what anyone's ethics ought to be?) are matters of the law! The torah, the law revealed to Moses. The Pharisees mistake, their ethical lapse did not result, Jesus said, from their embracing the law, but from their neglecting it. Their supposed reverence for the law, their commitment to the law for which they were famous among the Jews, Jesus said, was in fact a violation of the law and a neglect

of the law and a perversion of the law.

This is a highly important point. Indeed, from the viewpoint of Christian ethics, there is no more important issue than this. For many Christians through the ages, not merely modern dispensationalists, have, for a variety of reasons, supposed that the law of which the Lord Jesus was here speaking, the Torah of Moses, the ten commandments especially, was rendered obsolete by Christ and his apostles. In other words, it may have been necessary to tell the Pharisees that they had forsaken the law, but it would never be necessary to tell a NT Christian the same thing, for the law, the Torah, the ten commandments and the substantial body of case law derived from the ten commandments in the Torah, no longer directs Christian behavior.

Now, it is true that most of these views, and their have been many varieties of this view in Christian history, were muddled and very inconsistent. To the credit of modern dispensationalism, it achieved a measure of consistency that many other variations of the same view never did. It said plainly that the ten commandments were no law for Christians today, that Christians, in fact, were not under a law, but were subject only to the principle of love. They held that Christian ethics now was nothing more nor less than the direction that love would take a believer in his behavior, love for God and for man. But if we are still forbidden to commit adultery, it is not because of the seventh commandment, but because it is inconsistent with love for one's neighbor.

Now, I don't expect that this view is entertained by anyone here. It is, interestingly entertained by fewer and fewer teachers in what used to be dispensational strongholds, such as Dallas Theological Seminary, my father's alma mater. But there remains a residual antinomianism in the church today, even in the Reformed church that is not dispensationalism's fault at all. Indeed, Dr. Buswell, in his Systematic Theology, has a paragraph entitled "Dispensationalism in Calvin and Hodge." The clever anachronism in the title ("dispensationalism" as a theological school didn't exist in Calvin's day and scarcely in Hodge's) was Dr. Buswell's way of indicating that mistakes regarding the Law and the relationship of the OT to the NT can be found in our Reformed icons as well as in modern dispensationalism.

Now, tonight I want to deal with this matter head on by considering Calvin's view of the relationship between the OT and the NT. The problem with this question is that it is such a large issue. One cannot simply quote this verse or that, for one's view of the Christians present relationship to the law of Moses is bound up with one's entire understanding of the history of salvation. This is why these questions are so difficult to discuss with Christians of other views -- it is hard even to understand one another because each is looking at the Bible and its teaching from completely different perspectives. But, I want to do what I can this evening.

But, throughout, I want you to remember the point I am after. I want thoroughly and completely to disabuse you of any idea that we are not still obliged to keep the commandments of God and that the law of God, as it was revealed to Moses, is not still the basis, the foundation, of any truly biblical ethics. This is, as I said, an immensely important point, because **most of the Bible's ethical instruction** is in the OT law, and if that is no longer relevant or binding for us, we will have to approach ethics in a completely different way. (Indeed, one of the indications of the impossibility

of that is that almost all people who have embraced some form of the view that the OT law has been nullified in the NT still use that law and consider it an authority in one way or another. Most dispensationalist ministers still favor the tithing, for example! All evangelical ministers consider incest to be sinful, but its only condemnation is in the OT law. And so on. The subjects are endless in which we will have virtually no counsel in Holy Scripture, if the OT law is no longer God's word to us: our responsibilities toward the environment, laws regarding evidence in court cases, and many more. **No, I want all of you to be convinced of the abiding authority of the Torah and ready to head for Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy to find direction for your life and behavior in the certainty that all of that ethical instruction is, as it was in Moses's day, the living Word of God to be believed and obeyed.** And, even more, I want to establish that conviction so that I can show you how wonderfully relevant, practical, helpful, good, wise, and beautiful that all of that law is and how wisely and well a Christian will live who guides his feet by that law.

Now, regarding Calvin, let me say at the outset that he was far too clear a thinker and too careful a student of the Bible to take the view that the OT law had been superseded or that the ten commandments were no longer in force. He knew that there had been but one covenant of grace from the very beginning, one experience of salvation, one Redeemer, and one Christian life.

He speaks categorically and persuasively to the effect that the covenant of the patriarchs and of Moses is the same in substance with that taught by Christ and his apostles. These various manifestations of the single covenant vary only in mode of administration. The unity of the covenant, he wrote [Institutes, II, x, 2] consisted in three particulars:

- a. It was a promise of eternal life
- b. It was a covenant of grace
- c. Its mediator in each case was Jesus Christ

He then proceeded to demonstrate these three points, concentrating on the first, the OT's promise of eternal life because that was the Anabaptist's claim, that the OT only promised earthly blessing and not eternal life and was thus a different faith and a different salvation and life. Calvin's case is solid and has been made still more solid by biblical scholarship since.

But, then, Calvin goes on to delineate what he regards as the differences between the covenants of the OT and the NT. He lists five. And I'm going to argue that only two of them are accurate at all and they require qualification and that the other three are mistaken, plain and simple! (Before I list them, however, I should say this. Calvin's exegesis of biblical texts is often very much better than his summary of the differences between the covenants or administrations of the epochs of salvation.

He was such a perceptive commentator, he is usually very careful to avoid the pitfalls into which many others have fallen. When I did my study of this large question I often found that Calvin's treatment of the text was better than almost anyone else's. I think the problem is that he was working with a paradigm -- we still work with it today -- that fundamentally confuses even the most perceptive. And that is the idea that the terms OT and NT refer to tracts of Holy Scripture or to the pre-Pentecost and post-Pentecost stages in the revelation of God's covenant of grace. Once you

have accepted that use of the terms, as the church did in the later 2nd century -- it is not taught in the Bible! -- you are in for trouble reconciling what the Bible does say about the epoch of Moses and the epoch of Christ and his apostles. Calvin did not escape that trouble; no one has.)

The differences in administration [Inst. II, xi, 1ff.]

1. The promise of the OT, while it was a promise of eternal life, was displayed under earthly benefits while the Lord now in the NT leads our minds more directly to the contemplation of the future life, leaving aside "the lower mode of training that he used with the Israelites." (1-3)

Now is this so? Three simple questions?

1. Does not Hebrews 11 say that the OT saint looked right past the earthly blessings to the city of God?
2. Is it not in the OT that we have so much reflection on the fact that believers often suffer in this world and do not get the blessings that would seem to belong to them and that the wicked often prosper; but, that God will put all things right in the end? Psalm 73.
3. Does not Ephesians 6:3, Mark 10:30 say plainly that God's eternal blessings are still in this epoch foreshadowed by temporal blessings.

This raises an important question. If the NT says the same thing as the OT but says it less often does that mean that that truth has become less important, or is it simply that in the much shorter NT many things are not said as often or to the same length because they have already been said so comprehensively in the first 39 books of the Bible? People have been distracted here in many ways. (E.g. those who have held that God is less a God of wrath in the NT than he was in the OT. But his wrath is taught plainly and emphatically in the NT. You just don't have a dozen straight chapters elaborating it as you have in Isaiah, e.g.) Calvin's attempt to demonstrate this difference exegetically does not bear scrutiny. [E.g. II, xi, 2: Paul in Gal 4:1-2 is not referring to the Jewish nation as a children and slaves but to the unbeliever who is still in bondage because of his unbelief. This is a frequent confusion in the reading of the NT. The contrast between unbelief and faith is turned into a contrast between OT belief and NT belief.]

2. The second difference: "in the absence of reality, [the OT] showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance; the NT reveals the very substance." (4-6)

Now this is no doubt true in a certain respect. Revelation is progressive; the sacrifices were types of the sacrifice of Christ. But by itself this is not an accurate account of the facts.

1. It is true of only some things revealed; many other things are clearly and finally revealed in the OT. Our doctrine of the nature of God is an OT doctrine, for example.
2. It is only relatively true. Many of us would use Isa. 53 before Romans 3 to explain the cross.
3. It remains true of the NT as well in comparison with the consummation ("for now we see

through a glass darkly...")

4. It overstates the difference between the sacrifices of the OT, for example, and the Lord's Supper -- both simply signs and seals of the reality! Whether one looks forward or back is not the great issue and is never said to be in the NT.

3. The third difference: "The OT is literal, the NT spiritual; the spirit/letter distinction. (7-8)

He takes from Jeremiah 31 and 2 Cor. 3 a distinction that is not made in either of those texts. This distinction does not exist as a difference between the gospel in various epochs. It exists rather as a way of describing the difference between the way an unbeliever, a legalist looks at the gospel and the way a believer does. Many scholars of our tradition have deserted Calvin at this point. In all the texts where that contrast occurs the contrast is absolute not relative and has to do with the presence or absence of faith. The protest of the OT prophets and Jesus and the Apostles against the Judaizers: not a description of the relative superiority of the NT to the OT.

4. The fourth distinction: The OT is of bondage to fear, the NT engenders freedom. (9-10)

But here again he employs a distinction the Bible makes between two spiritual states not two epochs in the history of salvation. (Hebrews makes this point emphatically: you have cause to fear today, just as the faithless Jews did, if you do not continue in your faith, for our God is a consuming fire, and it is a terrible thing to fall into his hands! And the OT believers had none of this fear, only the faithless had it, says Hebrews and the entire OT! Where is this craven fear in the Psalms, among the OT saints? It doesn't exist because they knew God as one who delights to show mercy (Micah) who has separated their sins as far from them as the east is from the west (Ps 103) and so on...

The problem is sharply posed by the fact that Calvin turns the sharp, absolute contrast drawn in Galatians and Hebrews between fear and faith into a relative contrast. Paragraph 10: "our analysis distinguishes between the clarity of the gospel and the obscurer dispensation of the word that had preceded it." But that is not the distinction these books make: death and life, faith and unbelief, condemnation and acceptance. Calvin's logic would require the sacramental worship of the OT to be bondage **per se** which the OT says it was not and the NT never says it was. It is only bondage when denatured by unbelief, when it is turned into a performance, a way of earning merit with God.

5. The fifth difference: the OT has reference to one nation, the NT to all nations (11-12).

Clearly and a great difference. This is, in fact, the main difference and the only one the Bible actually itself draws attention to and discusses.

Though even here nuance is required:

1. We know as early as Gen 12 and then all through the OT that all the nations would be blessed by Abraham's seed.

2. Even in Israel's worship, while the door was not thrown wide open, it was left ajar:
 - a. Provision made in the law for the alien to be circumcised and have passover;
 - b. The prayer for the alien at the dedication of the temple.

Now you may rightly ask, "Who is our poor minister to criticize John Calvin and to ask us to have a different opinion than that of the great mind and heart of the Genevan Reformer?" A fair question. But let me answer it by saying not only that I am not asking you to take my word for it, but that I really want you to consider whether or not Calvin's arguments from Scripture are really valid, but also by saying that far better minds than mine have come to the same conclusion.

Listen to a small part of the discussion of this issue by R.L. Dabney (identify). I wish I could read the whole of his treatment but it would take too much time and be too confusing, I expect.

He has summarized Calvin's view of the differences between the OT and the NT just as I did and now proceeds:

Now, the significance of all of this for our series on ethics is just this. This idea that the Mosaic covenant was an inferior religion and was done away with by Christ and his apostles is the only basis for the view that the law of God given through Moses is likewise made obsolete. If that view of things is false -- as I argue it is, completely false -- then we must read the many statements of the NT concerning the OT law in a different light:

1. "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. I tell you the truth. Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen,, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished."
2. "Do we then nullify the law by this faith? By no means, we establish the law."
3. "For we know the law is spiritual...holy, just, and good."
4. "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts."
5. "There is therefore now no condemnation...in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."
6. "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." "Those who obey his commands live in him..."

Or those statements in which the law is cited as still in effect:

1. 1 Cor 9:9 "You shall not muzzle the ox while treading out the grain..." with application to ministers. (1 Tim 5:18)
2. 1 Cor. 5:1
3. Eph. 6:3
4. Rom. 12:19 (It is mine to avenge; I will repay: Deut 32:35)
5. Etc.

Or those many statements that identify the gospel of Christ with the message of the OT covenant and Moses:

1. Heb. 4:1
2. John 5
3. Rom 10; etc.

In other words, the law of God as it is revealed in all 66 books of the Bible is our ethical standard. We will consider how we are to use that law next time.