

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL ETHICS No. 4

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Review

We are speaking these few Sunday evenings of the role the law plays as one of the foundations of Christian ethics. Last Lord's Day evening I made the point that, according to the Scripture, the perspective one brings to the law is fundamentally important both to true obedience and to the true interpretation of the law or its true application to life questions and ethical cases. That is, one who wants dearly to love God with his life is far more likely both to obey, to obey with a true motive (which is a large part of true obedience according to the Bible) and to find the right application of the law to his own ethical questions.

Now tonight I want to elaborate that thought with respect to biblical casuistry, the application of the general principles of God's law to the thousand and one questions of right and wrong that we face, questions the law does not directly address.

The Bible contains some examples of casuistry, as we shall see, it gives us, in that way, broad instruction in how to apply the law to new questions and cases of conscience, but still leaves a great deal for us to conclude from our own application of the law. And the more pure and grateful our motives in seeking to do the right, the more we are seeking the love of God in our obedience, the more likely we will be to get the answer right when we question the Bible as to what we ought to do in this matter or that.

Let me explain. Our problem, always our problem is a too superficial view of the law -- the same problem the Pharisees had, though to a much more developed and dangerous degree.

Take for example the 6th commandment: not to murder. As we pointed out last week, the rest of the Bible teaches us to find in that negative commandment also the positive duty to love and care for our neighbor. Further, as we again saw last week, the prohibition of murder contains within it all the lesser forms of the same sin: hatred, indifference, cruelty toward others and the like. It reaches into our hearts, our attitudes, our thoughts, and all of our words and actions toward others, the sixth commandment does.

But, what does that mean? Well, it means that every day we live next to a neighbor, every day we are involved with other people at work, every day we encounter others in the course of our daily rounds, we are obliged to keep the sixth commandment. True obedience to this commandment will require a thousand things of us and different things every day we live. **But what things?** Ah, there's the rub! What does that searching commandment to put our neighbor's welfare before our own -- which is what the sixth commandment means in one particular aspect of life -- what does that mean? Tonight? Tomorrow? Well, the Bible doesn't give us casuistry to that extent! How active ought I to be in the solicitation of my neighbor? How involved should I become in the life of my workmates? How much should I intervene when I know that he or she is in some difficulty? How much should I attempt to better their lot? Should I give them gifts and what kind of gifts? Should I help him with his house, with his car, offer to care for his kids while they are away of an evening? Where is

the line found that separates a right commitment to my neighbor from a commitment that is overzealous? Remember Jesus told us to lay down our lives for our neighbors! But, how do I divide up my responsibilities, for my own family, my Christian brethren, etc? **So much left unsaid.** But, don't you see how true love for God and a desire to please him and honor him and adorn his Word and gospel will lead a man or woman nearer than anything else to a proper application of that commandment in daily life.

Let me give a still better example. What of the first commandment, which Paul says, forbids all forms of greed. What purchases at the mall do not violate that law, what do? How much may I spend for my home, my car, my clothes, my books and not make them a god to myself? The Bible gives us no formula. Only the law itself. How much depends upon the spirit that one brings to that law, the desire to honor God's holiness in my life.

Or, take the Sabbath. We all want a simple explanation of what Sabbath observance requires? What may we do on Sunday and what may we not? But the Bible says very little in answer to that question. It tells us some things, but leaves much to our own consideration and application of the general law of Sabbath sanctification. It doesn't tell us about TV on Sunday, about sports and recreations, about eating out, about a trip to Mt. Rainier. We must answer those questions ourselves. But who will answer them rightly? Well, the man or woman who really **wants** to keep the day holy, who really **wants** God's purposes in that day to be fulfilled in his or her life, **who really loves the law and wants its holiness in his or her own heart and life.**

And, you see, if you approach it that way, you may find that the same activity is rejected on one day, for one reason, and accepted as good and right, on another day, for another reason. This is exactly what the Pharisees did not see, because of their superficial understanding of the law's demands and because they left the motive out of consideration, which is key to all true obedience.

Take, for example, Eric Liddell, the hero of the movie "Chariots of Fire," famous for refusing to run in an Olympic Race on Sunday. But in the Japanese prison camp in China, where he eventually died of a brain tumor, when the young people in the camp refused to honor his principles and played soccer on a Sunday and fighting broke out because there was no referee for the game, he turned out the next Sunday to be the referee -- to keep a handful of bored, imprisoned youngsters at peace with one another. Was that a violation of the Sabbath, or was that keeping the Sabbath day holy in the very same way his refusal to participate in sports had been years before? I think it was keeping the Lord's Day holy, a faithful application of God's law to changing circumstances.

Do you see my point? It is the motive, the interest, the purpose one has in looking to the law that so much determines both its application and whether one will offer a true obedience. The law's reach is absolute; every single thought must be made captive to Christ, every choice, every decision. The law gives you general principles, but by no means comprehensive instruction.

John Newton put it best: love is the best casuist. What does true love for God and for man suggest is the proper application of the law in any particular case? David could take the forbidden shewbread for his men who were starving, even though it was normally forbidden to eat that bread. You can do works of necessity on the Sabbath -- though that is not in the commandment itself -- because the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. And the godly knew that long before Jesus actually said it.

Now, let's consider some instances of biblical casuistry to notice what sort of principles should govern our application of the law. Just what **sort of principles**, we still cannot deduce from the law a comprehensive, timeless, changeless description of righteous living because it is the very nature of the law to require a principled and loving application of its principles to the infinite number of situations we face. We cannot know what is right until we weigh the law in the light of the circumstances, all the factors that apply.

1. Consider first the application of Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9:7-12 and 1 Tim. 5:17-18. "Do not muzzle the ox while treading out the grain" becomes a command to provide financial support for ministers of the Word.

By what process: the general principle: the worker is worthy of his hire. But, also, a fortiori, if this is true of animals, how much more of men!

2. Or, consider Deut. 17:7 (very important re theonomy) in 1 Cor. 5:13. Here OT capital punishment has become NT excommunication.

Here the different circumstances -- the church no longer a nation, no longer holding the *ius gladii*, inflicts a corresponding but not identical punishment as that of the law of Moses. But, nb, in 1 Cor. 5:13 the OT form of the law is cited as needing to be done! That is, excommunication fulfills the law of Deut. 7:17 in the way appropriate to the new epoch.

Now, let's try some applications of our own.

1. What about nuclear waste? How may the law be applied to ethical questions like that that no one had ever considered in biblical times? **Very easily.**

The case law of the sixth commandment, already given in Exod. 21:28-32 points the way. If you can't reasonably ensure the safety of others, you cannot responsibly claim to have any right to create nuclear waste. On the other hand, reasonable risks are not forbidden.

2. What about environmental laws regarding endangered species?

Deut. 22:6-7 is casuistry of the 8th commandment, and, perhaps as well, the 6th. We are the stewards of this world and are to take care of its reproductive capacity. (Christians should have been in the forefront of environmental concern and, had they been, perhaps it would

have been coopted by extremist views as it has.) It is not forbidden to exploit the species, only to take actions that threaten their survival. Remember, human beings are more important than birds, as Jesus said. But, the Lord cares for and feeds the birds of the air, as the Lord also reminded us. Each case will be different, but such are the principles love will seek to serve and respect in all its actions.

3. What about practices forbidden because of the context of the practice? Deut. 14:1-2 Forbids shaving the front of your head **for the dead**. Not any and every shaving of the head, but one for that specific pagan purpose. Or 14:21 prohibits cooking a kid in its mother's milk, which we now know was a part of Canaanite fertility rites. These commands then amount to an obligation to retain our separateness from pagan ways and pagan rituals that are contrary to the true worship of God.

And yet, much similarity is acknowledged (temple architecture; sacrifices; circumcision; etc.). Not always easy to know when the line has been crossed. Love is the best casuist!

But, then, what about tatoos. They are forbidden in the law (Lev. 19:28) in a statement that also forbids cutting one's bodies for the dead -- that is, that forbids customs insofar as they are pagan rituals with no basis in the true faith. These were customs of mourning that were being discussed. God's people must not mourn as the pagans do who have no true understanding of salvation or the resurrection. By these practices they were attempting to appease demons. But one cannot from such a passage, or any other passages in the Bible, extract a general prohibition against tatoos. Indeed, in Isa. 44:5, there seems to be a very positive account of the inscribing of the Lord's name on one's hand. And what of the very similar practice of boring a hole in the ear to signify that a slave is a slave for life, a practice the Bible actually commands in certain instances? Now, shall we cover our bodies with tatoos? Love is the best casuist!

4. The law concerning rooftop fences (22:8) is not hard to apply.
It is part of the casuistry of the sixth commandment ("so that you will not be guilty of blood"). You are responsible, within reason, for your neighbor's safety.

But, what about this? In that same Japanese prison camp, the inmates, the English community in China when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, missionaries, diplomatic types, businessmen and all their families, received food parcels from the Red Cross. In those parcels were cigarettes. Most of the missionaries abhorred cigarettes, but, though they wouldn't have done this under some circumstances, under these many of them lost their scruples and traded them for other things they wanted more, because cigarettes were in short supply. Eric Liddell destroyed his, a man of conscience to the end. But, was that right? I doubt it. In a prison camp, torn by short tempers already, would it not have been right to give away the cigarettes to the smokers, not to sell them, but to give them?
Love is the best casuist! Love for God who causes his rain to shine on the just and the unjust alike, and love for our neighbor.

5. Now, I will admit that there are laws that are hard to know exactly what to do with? It is not always easy to know exactly which laws are ceremonial in character and in the OT only express basic principles of holiness that are expressed in other ways today. (The law forbidding the mixture of seeds in a field in Lev. 19:19 a case in point.) But then, the more difficult the task, the more it deserves our special consideration. And, again, love will be the best casuist.

Palmer Robertson once told his seminary class that he had yet to figure out how to preach a sermon on the law of the jealous husband or the test for the unfaithful wife (Num 5:11-31), but he was working on it!

Meantime, let us be holy as God is holy and use the law to guide our steps as we see it being used in Holy Scripture, and let a true love for God and for others guide us in that work of applying the law to separate cases. Remember love for God and others, not for ourselves. There is the rub!