

Review

We have so far, in 11 evening studies considered the first two foundations of Christian ethics, that is, the first two authorities for our living, the first two ways by which we determine what is right and what is wrong, what we are to do and what we are not. We have considered the law of God as it is revealed in Holy Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We now come to the **third foundation** of biblical ethics: **the example of Jesus Christ.**

The Lord Jesus drew attention himself to the fact that his life and behavior were to be a standard for his followers. For example, after washing his disciples feet, he said to them "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." Or consider the statement he made after blessing the little children who were brought to him: "...whoever welcomes a little child like this **in my name** welcomes me." Now what does "in my name" mean except to do something in the Lord's place, to do it for him because he cannot be here to do it himself, which is to say, do what you know he would do were he here himself. In other words, follow the example he set.

The other NT writers make a great deal of the believer's duty to imitate Jesus Christ, to follow the example he has set. Paul, in Romans 8:29 reminds us that the whole purpose of God's grace in our lives is that we, eventually, might be "conformed to the likeness of God's Son," that is, that we might be made like the Lord Jesus. And over and over again we are told to practice that likeness as a way of living the Christian life.

Phil. 2:5 "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God..."

1 John 3:16: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

1 Peter 2:19-21: "To this [i.e. suffering for the sake of righteousness] you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps."

Years ago, a man named Charles Sheldon wrote a very popular book bearing the title of those last three words from 1 Peter 2:21, In his Steps.

It told the story of a pastor and a church whose lives were transformed by following the example of Jesus. A homeless man, he would have been called a bum in those days, came to a church asking for help and the minister turned him away. The next week he came back, this time to a service, and stood up and told the congregation that they were all hypocrites for calling themselves Christians but not helping him in his need, for Jesus, he said, would never have done that. This accusation so cut the pastor and the congregation to the quick that they determined to live in the future according to Christ's

example, determining what they should do in any situation by asking themselves "what would Jesus do?". This way of thinking about life transformed the people and made them wonderfully fruitful in their Christian living.

Well, there is a great deal of truth in that way of looking at our living and that way of directing our steps: what would Jesus do? There are limits to this, of course, cautions that need to be laid down at the first.

1. In the first place, Jesus' example is not to be followed at the expense of his teaching, as if somehow his example is apart from or even against the law that he himself has given us. We get this all the time in the government of the church, both at the level of the church session and the presbytery: folk who are sure that Jesus would never do what he has commanded us to do in the disciplining of the disobedient, for example. In the case of the washing of the disciples' feet he not only set the example, he gave a command at the same time. His law and his example are not in competition with one another, rather the one illustrates and commends and explains the other. Very often, I fear, people appeal to the example of the Lord, often out of context and intentionally forgetful of the entirety of that example, precisely in order to set aside something that Jesus taught or commanded.
2. Second, Christ cannot be our example in many things. He can be our example, for instance, in resisting temptation for he did that perfectly and showed us how to do it by doing it himself in the very way that we must (with Scripture, by prayer, by watchfulness, etc.). But he cannot be our example in the confessing of our sins to God, for he never sinned and so never confessed [Peter is a better example of this]. He cannot be our example in conversion, in coming to faith from unbelief, for he never did [Paul is a better example here]. He cannot be our example in deferring to those wiser and better than himself for none were.
3. Third, Christ can be imitated only where our vocation or calling is the same as his. This fact cuts two ways. In the first, it is clear enough that we cannot die for the sins of the world, but it is also clear that his vocation required him to remain unmarried, which may not be the case for many of us; made him to live a nomad's life, owning little or no property ["foxes have holes..."], which need not and usually is not the case for us. In the second, the fact that he lived a life without property does not, by itself, commend that life to anyone as a more or even particularly righteous way of life. It belonged to his special vocation. But to make the example of Jesus an argument for ascetic living, as medieval monasticism did, is clearly a mistake and misreads the meaning of that example. [Years ago a fellow came to the church in the middle of a week day dressed in sandals and a garb such as we might have thought Jesus would have customarily worn. He was begging as a way of life in

imitation of Jesus. Jesus, after all, did, at least through the public ministry, depend upon the charity of others. But did he do that so as to teach us all to do the same?] In the same way, he ate and drank sufficient to give his enemies occasion to accuse him of being a glutton and a drunk. But the fact that he did does not require all Christians to drink wine. (Though, clearly, it makes impossible the claim that Christians in general should not drink wine!)

4. Finally, we must be careful not to assume that we are capable of reproducing Jesus' behavior at many points where he did what was either surprising or revealed a measure of insight and spiritual authority appropriate to him but which it would be dangerous for us to claim.

For example, Jerram Barrs reminded us recently of occasions when Jesus, as it were, in Dr. Schaeffer's phrase, told sinners who were not yet ready to believe in him to "ride their tiger." When asked by the rich young ruler what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him: "Keep the commandments." Now we may understand why Jesus said that to him and how right it was for the Savior both to expose that man's misunderstanding of sin and righteousness and to force upon him the implications of his unwillingness to submit his life to God. But for Jesus to tell someone who is asking after the way of salvation to keep the commandments and for you or me to tell a person that are two very different things.

It is interesting to me that, so far as I know, we never find Paul answering questions such as these the way Jesus sometimes did.

Or take his response, or lack of response, to the Syro-Phoenician woman, whose daughter was demon-possessed. When first she cried out to him he didn't even answer her; when she persisted in her cries to him he replied in a way that, at best, cannot be taken otherwise than short and tart: she cried "Lord, help me" and he replied "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs [she was a Gentile]." She continued to plead and finally he rewarded her faith and persistence. But, should you are I answer a needy person as Jesus did? [George Bernard Shaw once said that this was an instance in which Christ was not a Christian. To which John Gerstner tartly replied, "Christ was not a Christian; he makes people Christians."] I doubt we should do as Jesus did here! How would we know, as he did, what was appropriate for her and what the issue of the conversation would be?

In other words, we must take great care, in thinking about following the example of Jesus Christ while he was in the world, not to blur the distinction between his life and ours and, especially, not to mistake the vast difference between his perfect wisdom and goodness and authority on the one hand and our sinful and terribly limited understanding and character and authority on the other.

Charles Sheldon's book was as popular as it was, struck a nerve as

it did, because in those years there was much less emphasis on the example of Jesus in evangelical preaching precisely because the liberals made so much use of it. It was all they wanted to retain of Jesus Christ, his example of a life of love and service of others.

They didn't believe any longer that he was God in the flesh or that his death on the cross turned away God's wrath from our sins. Their Christianity consisted largely of a message about love as a way of life with Jesus the grand exemplar of that life. Andrew Murray, the famous South African evangelist, missionary, and writer of spiritual books, drew attention to this when he wrote that because of the liberal emphasis on Jesus' example "The absolute necessity of following the example of His life is not preached with the same distinctness as that of trusting the atonement of his death." Now that is important for us to hear.

On the other hand, it should not be hard to see that the role that Jesus plays as our Savior and King is far more important and receives far more emphasis in the Bible than his role as our example. As we have already said, there are many ways in which he cannot be our example, in any case; but he is the only Savior there is for every human being.

Still, when all is said and done, Jesus is our example in many ways, and his life an important part of the teaching of righteous living that we are given in the Bible.

There are at least three great benefits to adding the Lord's example to our foundations of biblical ethics, as in fact the Bible does.

1. First, Jesus, with his life, shows us obedience and righteousness and love in flesh and blood. In other words, his example takes ethics out of the speculative and theoretical realm and firmly plants it in the real world of human beings like you and me.

It is an often made observation that there are a great many people who can talk knowledgeably and at length about the meaning of love and the obligations of justice who, themselves, don't seem either to love anyone in particular or to advance the interests of justice in any practical way. As was said of Leo Tolstoy, they are great at loving mankind, but never managed to love any particular, individual human being very well, if at all. It is so easy for us to make ethics an abstraction, a debating point rather than an actual way of life.

And there are such people in every church and all of us in this church are such people to one degree or another. We talk a much better ethics than we live.

But Jesus' ethics were the very practice of his life at the most personal and individual level. He taught us to love our enemies and he did it himself -- magnificently, transcendentally. He taught us to speak the truth in love and he did that beautifully his whole life.

He taught us to seek first the kingdom of God and leave our material prosperity in the Lord's hands and he did that himself. A man who could have commanded the greatest wealth and power and fame of any man who ever lived gave himself to other things for the kingdom's

sake. He taught us to take up our cross and deny ourselves for God's sake and never was there a man who so perfectly and completely did just that.

Jesus' own example forces upon us the recognition that these high ethics of the Bible, this life lived for God and for others, is to be the real stuff of our daily living, not some mere philosophy. This is to be the way we treat others, the way we manage our affairs, the way we speak, the way we conduct business morning, noon, and night.

You see, Jesus told us in many ways to love one another. But seeing him pour water into a basin, stoop in front of his disciples with a towel around his waste, and wash their feet, man by man, that takes the commandment down into our actual daily relationships with human beings. We are to do that too, just like he did; there is to be that humility, that self-forgetfulness, that surprising attention to others that there was in him. **That** is what he means by loving one another, not simply an intellectual commitment to the idea of love.

Or take another example. Actually not holding against another his sins against you, but going on with that person in love and a genuine interest in him -- **that** is what it means to forgive seventy times seven, because that is what we see Jesus doing: simply brushing aside his disciples' repeated failings to help him and betrayals of him and misinterpretations of him and all their falling behind him and setting his hard-won work and ministry back by their foolish and sinful words and deeds.

2. Second, Jesus' example, his life which we are to imitate, forces the standard higher and does not allow us to settle for anything less in our lives than the perfect obedience he himself offered to God.

The fact that Jesus lived a sinless life is a constant reminder that believers, in the words of Handley Moule, "are expected to be **total abstainers** from vice, in a world where indulgence, at least as to the principle of it, was ubiquitous." He stands above us as a living rebuke to any impurity of thought or life in any degree whatsoever. [Henry, Christian Personal Ethics, p. 410.]

The Christian life cannot be lived on the basis of any compromise with sin, any accommodation to what is wrong and evil. We, of course, are all sinners, but we must, if we are Christians, be committed to be righteous in every way, not merely in some ways, not only in the ways that are acceptable in our time and culture, but in every way. The principle of our obedience must be the perfection of our God. We are to be holy and perfect because he is holy and perfect. And Jesus was.

In him we finally find a human being who is righteous in every way, pure, holy, good in every aspect of his life: as a servant of God, as a friend, a citizen, a son, a church member, a worker, a leader of others, etc. And we cannot be his faithful followers, we cannot

lead a truly ethical life, if we are not straining hard to be perfect in every one of the aspects of our lives as well. Far too much -- I know this as your pastor -- we are all, in the subtle ways of our secret hearts, willing to accommodate disobedience in one area of our lives and comfort ourselves in regard to it by the fact that we are obedient in other areas. We are a poor husband or wife but we are faithful at church; we are poor parents but we tithe regularly; we are poor tithers but we have family devotions; we are unfaithful sexually but we witness a lot; and so on.

We know, with others, how one area of real sinfulness can cheapen and weaken and spoil the rest of a Christian's faithfulness don't we, at least in the case of others.

It is hard for us to forget the racism of some of our Southern Presbyterian heroes -- who were great men of faith and godliness in many respects, but who make us cringe when we read what they said about slavery and the blacks.

We are so disappointed to hear Samuel Rutherford railing at men who were his closest friends, refusing to take the Lord's Supper with them, because of a political disagreement.

We can hardly think the same way about John Wesley again when we hear about his loveless marriage and how his wife was in her grave for some days before he even knew she was dead.

And it grieves us to hear of Lancelot Andrewes' pusillanimity before the King of England. The author of the celebrated devotions doing the wicked King's dirty work so as not to lose favor at court.

But not Jesus. He was as pure in his speech as he was in his actions; as courageous in his public affairs as he was when completely alone with his fears; as humble and kind in dealing with the small and the weak and the helpless as in dealing with the powerful and influential.

And we are not to rest until we are as he was. No stone unturned, no sins left unmolested, no quarter given anywhere to that which is not consistent with the holiness of God.

3. And, finally, in the third place, the example of Jesus ennoble Christian ethics and righteous living.

I mean that it adorns it, makes it beautiful and impressive to us in a way that mere ethical teaching cannot.

You see Jesus praying for his enemies and you know at once that that is the truly beautiful and righteous life and want to do that yourself.

You see Jesus being unfairly and cruelly accused of sins he did not commit and remaining silent and refusing to answer back and you know at once that such silence is not weakness but tremendous strength, true faith, and genuine humility and you want that for yourself, if you are a Christian. You see Jesus spending himself, using himself up for the sake of the salvation of others and you immediately accept

that that is a truly good life and what you want to be true of yourself, however hard you know it is and will be to practice that self-forgetfulness and that love of others yourself.

So, absolutely, ask yourself, over and over again -- when confronted with decisions that must be made, when faced with temptations, when you find yourself unenthusiastic before opportunities for Christian service: what would my Redeemer do? What would Jesus do? How would he act now? What choice would he make?

Especially in the areas of temptation to sin, the summons to love one another and serve one another, to love your enemies and to be silent before criticism: what would Jesus do? It usually, at least in those areas, is not difficult for a principled Christian to answer that question. And, then, of course, do what he would do; imitate his example and so be in fact as well as in name a true disciple, a true follower of Jesus Christ.