

Review

We have completed our consideration of the foundations of biblical ethics, the ways in which we are taught right from wrong. We have considered in some detail the law of God and its application to our lives, the guidance of the Holy Spirit and how that comes to us, the example of the Lord Jesus (and by analogy the lesser example of those whose lives are commended to us in Holy Scripture) and, finally, last time, the direction of our conscience.

We move on now to the consideration of **the virtues**, the forms by which, according to Holy Scripture, love primarily demonstrates itself in life. If the fundamental obligations of human life are love for God and love for others, how then do those loves manifest themselves?

It is right, certainly, to say that the virtues are simply forms or expressions of love, for love is clearly the comprehensive virtue of the Christian life. So our Savior taught. One older writer draws this inference also from the fact that "love" is mentioned first in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. He takes love to be more than simply one fruit among the many, but the principle fruit of which the others are various manifestations. He interpreted the remainder of the list, the qualities that follow "love," this way: "joy is love singing; peace is love resting; patience is love enduring; kindness is love's self-forgetfulness; goodness is love's character; faithfulness is love's habit; gentleness is love's true touch; self-control is love holding the reins."

Among the virtues, then, we are speaking of all those **traits or characteristics** of godliness and right living that the Scripture identifies. These include both what Prof. David Jones calls "the primary forms of love," taking a cue from the Lord's remark about the weightier matters of the law, which are, Jesus said, **justice, mercy, and faithfulness**, and, as well, the specific personal virtues that are enumerated in many places and in many ways all through Holy Scripture. I gave a series of evening studies on these virtues over nine Sunday evenings between January and April of 1989. As part of that series we considered **temperance, courage, chastity, zeal, modesty, generosity, honesty, tolerance, and love**.

From time to time it is necessary for ministers to acknowledge their errors. I am not speaking of errors of life, we haven't the time, believe me, for me to acknowledge those. I am speaking now, rather, of errors in teaching. "In many words there is sin," the Scripture says and certainly when one is interpreting the Bible to the same congregation for hours on end, he will certainly come to feel eventually that in one way or another he has mistaken or not done adequate justice to some text or theme in the Bible. No doubt I should see more such inadequacies, if not positive mistakes, in my teaching than I do. But, I see this one clearly enough and this is the time to acknowledge it. What follows now is a retraction, what I consider

to be an error in the way in which I taught the virtues in that series years ago. [I am in good company! Augustine's, Retractiones. Bill McColley's "retraction" on the Sabbath!]

In that series, in the consideration of each of the virtues that we studied, I argued that the biblical presentation of that virtue required us to see each virtue -- courage, chastity, temperance, honesty, and the like -- as **a golden mean** between two extremes. A balance between sins and obligations on either side. I have come to think that this is not an accurate or helpful way to state the Bible's perspective on virtue. You have heard me often enough on the fact that the Bible teaches many subjects **dialectically**. That it tends to present the opposite poles of a truth, each without qualification or mitigation, leaving those poles in tension with one another, refusing to resolve that tension. This is true about theological matters, such as divine sovereignty and human freedom. It is true about anthropological matters such as the equality of the sexes before God and the distinction of roles and subordination of women to men in family and church. It is also true about ethical matters, I have used the matter of cosmetics and perfumes and feminine beauty as an example in the past, concerning which some passages seem to forbid such attentions and interests and others unabashedly to celebrate them. And this dialectical approach to the revelation of the truth is also used in respect to the virtues.

My mistake, it seems to me, was in the term and the idea of a golden mean, as if, in fact, this tension was resolved in the exact center of any particular truth presented in the Bible. "Golden Mean" suggests a position that is composed of half of one side and half of the other, a kind of balance between the two, an average, if you will. No, as Charles Simeon put it, the truth lies not in the middle or in either extreme, **but in both extremes**.

I shouldn't have urged you to think of the virtues in terms of a golden mean. I want you to think of them rather in terms of the opposite extremes. For example:

1. **Temperance** (or moderation, or self-control, or sobriety) is not a virtue located half-way between, for example, the proper enjoyment of good food and drink, on the one hand, and drunkenness and gluttony, on the other. Temperance is not a way of life in which God's good gifts are partly or moderately enjoyed and we enjoy up to but not beyond what would constitute gluttony. Yet "golden mean" implies some kind of middle between these two extremes. But temperance of the Christian type is not some mild and harmless middle between too little enjoyment and too much, just the right amount of enjoyment, as it were. It is full and complete enjoyment **and** it is the full subjection of the body's desires to the law of God and the requirement of purity. Temperance lies not between the two extremes but **in both** the extremes. I told you years ago that we belong in the middle. No! We don't belong in the middle, we belong at one and the same time at both extremes of the continuum of virtue: full enjoyment

and absolute self-control.

2. **Courage** is not a virtue located half-way between such fortitude as will brook no obstacle in its pursuit of what is right and pleasing to God, even to the laying down of one's life, and that prudence that Scripture commends by which danger is wisely avoided. It is both of those things in full measure all the time.

3. **Chastity** is not a virtue located half-way between abstinence from unlawful sex and sexual faithfulness to one's spouse; it is both of those things to a complete degree: full eroticism within marriage and total abstinence from it outside of it. That is biblical chastity.

4. **Generosity**, once again, is not a virtue located half-way between stinginess and considering one's property to be the property of everyone else. It is a full practice of biblical stewardship and responsibility with what God has entrusted to every Christian, and, at the same time, a cheerful abandon in the using of one's property for the sake of others.

As we said weeks ago with questions of the application of the law of God to the many specific ethical questions of daily life, so we can see clearly also with regard to the virtues. Motive and intention mean **so much**. The man who wishes to be brave as a Christian should be, who cares to be chaste as Christ would have him, who hungers and thirsts to be generous in view of God's mercy to him, is the one who is going to know what any particular situation calls for: the enjoyment of food or fasting; the giving full reign to the erotic impulse or abstinence; standing fast even at risk of one's life or taking flight; building one's saving account or handing over one's only shirt.

Now, the importance of considering the virtues in a discussion of biblical ethics is precisely this. Biblical godliness is not simply a matter of isolated acts done in obedience to God. It is rather a way of life, a pattern of life, a practice that reflects the character and manner of God himself. This is why, in Holy Scripture, specific acts, ethical decisions, are always taken up into higher states and commitments of the soul that are specifically Christian and theological. The virtues are always linked to the motives and intentions of the heart and are always seen to be the manifestations of the true spiritual condition of the heart. Don't think this is a small matter. This was the fateful error of the Pharisees, who, over time, began to think of righteousness less and less as the way of life produced by gratitude to God and more and more of individual acts of obedience, one after another, sin becoming no longer a spiritual rebellion against God but simply the violation of specific rules. These rules, over time, were then arranged in gradations making possible a concentration on the avoidance of serious sins and the transformation of sin into something innocuous and grace into mere divine leniency was complete. And this is the way most people who would call themselves Christians think about life and about

salvation today.

They do not think of courage, temperance, chastity, humility, faithfulness, peaceableness, and so on, as expressions of love for and loyalty to God, as ways of manifesting Christ's spirit and character in your own. They do not see their behavior **Christocentrically or doxologically** and do not look to the Lord for it, as so much the reverse of their native self-absorption and rebellion against God as to be impossible apart from divine grace.

And, they do not see these virtues as simply splendid sins unless they are as much the expressions of the true desires and thoughts of the heart as outward behavior and actions.

After all, the virtues are commended by the world as well as by the Word of God. But, because they do not have this Christian base and impulse, because they are not the expression of fundamental commitments of the heart to God and to Christ, the world's virtues are not the same as Christian virtues at all. Homer's The Odyssey is nothing if it is not about virtue, the gaining of it, the practicing of it and the losing of it. But it is not Christian virtue that Homer teaches; the courage of the Kamikaze pilot is not the same courage taught in the Bible, and the zeal of the American business ladder-climber is not the zeal of the defender of the name of the Lord of Hosts.

When Jesus, for example, says that the weightier matters of the law are justice, mercy, and faithfulness, he speaks of things that are not acts in themselves, but more fundamental than that: ways of life, patterns of behavior; commitments of the heart, spiritual tastes and longings that lead to specific acts more than the individual acts themselves. In the Bible individual acts of righteousness are the product of the spiritual and moral impulses of the heart and without those even acts that are formally or technically virtuous are in fact corrupt, displeasing to God, and lacking the power of true virtue.

We've already seen at some length, in our consideration of the law of God, that it is the desire, the commitment, the hunger to be holy, to do that which pleases God, to fulfil the law, to keep the commandments that best directs a person into ethical living. This state of mind and heart is more important than the quality of ethical reasoning. In the Bible great stress is laid upon the motive of the heart, because the man or woman who genuinely hungers and thirsts to do right for God's sake is the man or woman who will see the right and do it, find the true application of God's law in his circumstances.

Newton again, "love is the best casuist."

Now, I want to ring the changes one more time on this point this evening.

Fundamental to an ethical life according to the bible is a virtuous life, that is, specific acts of righteousness, correct decisions in the face of ethical choices depend, in large part, on a virtuous character. We need generous men more than we need right thinking about particular cases of conscience in regard to charity toward the

needy. We need courageous men more than we need essays delineating the fine distinctions that separate occasions of martyrdom from occasions of flight.

But more than generous women or courageous men we particularly need **humble** Christian people, because humility is the foundation of all the virtues and an active ingredient in all of them. It may seem strange, at first, to say that humility is the ground of courage, chastity, temperance, and the like. But it is precisely for this reason, without humility these virtues cannot be the expression of any Christlikeness or genuinely Christian goodness. A vain courage may be possible, a vain temperance, but not theological courage, not Christian courage. [Winston Churchill's courage in combat in Cuba and his writing home to tell his mother of his hopes of getting a medal and wearing it at some party when he gets home. This is not the path of ethical living of a Christian type, not the character to lead us to the will of God.]

Given its fundamental place in biblical virtue perhaps it is not surprising, after all, that humility did not appear on any list of virtues in the classical philosophical tradition. It has apparently largely disappeared again from secular theories of virtue and ethics.

Mr. Hannula tells me that, in his experience, public high school students, as a rule, think humility is a bad thing, another way of saying humiliation.

But true humility, that proper sense of oneself as a creature and as a sinner before a holy God and before other sinners, that honest reckoning with the truth about oneself and that determination to live in the recognition of the grace and mercy that has been extended to you and to extend, as a principle of honor, that same mercy to others that God has shown you, that cheerful recognition of God's right to rule your life and willing submission of yourself to that rule -- I say **that** humility -- which is what the Bible means by humility -- is not a bad thing, it is a good thing, a very good thing, close to being the best thing that is ever found in the heart and life of human being.

Humility, after all, is just honesty about oneself in relation to God and others and a determination to live in the recognition and practice of that truth. As William Law reminded us: "Humility does not consist in having a worse opinion of ourselves than we deserve."

And, despite all of its bad press, despite people's constant confusion of true humility with its spurious imitations and corruptions -- gloominess, a servile subjection of oneself to everyone else, constant and morbid self-criticism and self-accusation, an inability to rejoice over and rest in the grace and forgiveness and acceptance of God -- I say, true humility is a most healthy, invigorating, fruitful virtue, spreading its cheer in every part of one's life.

As C.S. Lewis put it: "Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble

man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, swarmy person who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him....He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all."
 [Mere Christianity, 114]

In a very simple way, humility opens the way to a truly ethical life, because it frees up a person to think clearly and wisely about right and wrong without every matter clouded over with powerful considerations of self-interest.

In his wonderful book, The Life of God in the Soul of Man (a book that was instrumental in the conversion of George Whitefield) Henry Scougal discusses how humility actually leads to happiness and not to misery as the world suspects it must [pp. 80-81]:

...a proud and arrogant person is a trouble to all that converse with him, but most of all unto himself: everything is enough to vex him; but scarce any thing sufficient to content and please him. He is ready to quarrel with every thing that falls out; as if he himself were such a considerable person that God Almighty should do every thing to gratify him, and all the creatures of heaven and earth should wait upon him, and obey his will.

The vain, self-centered man cannot, in the matter of his behavior, in the matter of ethics, separate himself and his own worship and pleasure from his duty, he loves himself too much to love God enough to follow his will come wind, come weather, and so he is always finding his reasons not to do what God has said, always finds dark and doubtful what in the Bible is plain as the noonday sun. His ethical reasoning is clouded by his character! Humility wipes the window clean!

Let's take a particular ethical example. What are we to do when we feel that we have been treated or spoken of unfairly or dishonestly? Paul himself sometimes defends himself at length against the attacks of others (2 Cor. 11), but at other times he did not and Jesus, on several occasions reported in the Gospels, didn't reply to his accusers, though they were cruelly lying about him in circumstances calculated to do him the worst possible harm.

But this is a question very much easier to answer correctly in a spirit of true humility than otherwise. Then it is much easier to see that Paul spoke up for himself and his ministry when the attacks made against it were attacks on the Gospel and the Lord himself and that he kept his peace when only his own personal reputation was at stake. Defending oneself takes its virtue from pride and a sense that it is a high crime to criticize such as yourself. Humility says, cheerfully, with St. Teresa, "I am always very glad that my slanderers should tell a trifling lie about me rather than the whole terrible truth." Humility says, cheerfully with Charles Simeon, "In drawing

the balance, as between debtor and creditor, I find that if I have been robbed of pence, there are pounds and talents placed to my account to which I have no just title." Or, in other words, the Lord has covered for me far greater sins than this that I have been accused of and to defend myself at this point, to consider my name as too worthy to allow to be sullied, smacks of an unwillingness to acknowledge the full extent of my sinfulness, which would amount to a minimizing of Christ's grace and mercy to me, which I cannot do.

Or take a case of social ethics. Euthanasia seems suddenly unattractive and ethically impossible to a humble man who is acutely conscious of the vastness of the difference between God and man and, therefore, the appalling hubris, the bizarre type of arrogance that would lead a man to presume to fill God's shoes. And take a human life.

Or consider H.H. Kuyper, the son of Abraham Kuyper, during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Kuyper was the editor of the magazine The Herald, which, up to the time of the German occupation of Holland had been stalwart in its condemnation of the Nazi regime and in calling upon the Dutch to resist at all cost. **But, once the occupation had begun**, when other magazines were being closed and other editors, such as Klaas Schilder thrown in prison for expressing the very views The Herald itself had expressed but weeks before, Kuyper began singing a different tune. Now The Herald began to warn against the impulse to "seek martyrdom," urging the editors of church papers to exercise caution, he began to criticize those who resisted the Nazis or fled the country, and fell silent in its criticism of the German invaders and their program.

"There is good reason," Kuyper wrote, "to issue this warning [about keeping silent], for otherwise our churches may get themselves into trouble needlessly. This applies especially to the servant of the Word. If, through careless words or actions, he should give occasion for the imposition of punitive measures, not only he but also the congregation he serves would be affected. The flock would be deprived of its shepherd."

He would quote Matthew 10:16, about Christians being shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves to justify a situation in which The Herald was virtually the only religious paper that the Nazi regime continued to allow to be published throughout the war. Was it ethical reasoning that was primarily at fault here, or was it really simply a defect of character, cowardice in the face of an oppressor?

Do you see how the spirit one brings to the question, the virtue of his or her heart and life, will lay bare in so many cases the path of true goodness and righteousness?

But, here, of course, is the rub, isn't it? It is one thing to write a book about ethics, or preach a sermon series on ethics, or to have long discussions about ethical issues. Many of these questions --

from lying to the Nazis to euthanasia -- are intensely interesting and controversial. It can be highly absorbing to attempt to work out an ethical theory. Many have spent long hours doing just that in human history, many able and earnest people. The Pharisees were just one group of such people.

It is another thing entirely to accept that when all of that theorizing and discussing has been accomplished, true ethical living, true righteousness such as God desires, demands, and rewards, requires not nearly so much a clearly articulated philosophy of ethics as it requires true virtue and true virtue does not require knowledge nearly so much as it requires humility, which every true Christian who has ever sought it knows is the most painful of all the characteristics of Jesus to put on oneself, the most wearying to pursue, the most difficult to keep when once one has some little grasp and sense of it.

Let me finish with an historical anecdote as an example of what I mean by placing virtue above and before ethical reasoning, even the best and most biblical of such reasoning.

Many of you remember the interesting and moving piece of history from the Revolutionary War and the betrayal of Benedict Arnold. The English officer who was Arnold's contact in his plan to turn over West Point to the British was a Major by the name of John Andre. Arnold's treason was uncovered when Andre was captured and dispatches from Arnold to the British were discovered in his boot. Andre was a spy and by all the conventions and ethics of war, under which both armies existed, he was to be executed. The problem was that Andre was a fine man, a particularly fine man, and his character made an immediate impression on the American officers who were responsible to put him to death. He was honest, honorable, cheerful, full of good will toward other men, even his enemies. Washington himself, it is said, was deeply moved and troubled by the prospect of executing such a good man who, after all, was doing nothing but his duty, doing nothing but what American officers were as well sent to do in the prosecution of that war.

What was to be done? Do you remember now what was done? I will tell you that ethical reasoning was not what was, at last, needed in that situation. What was needed was men of character and virtue. Life will not be easy for such men, but the way of righteousness will stretch out before them, clearer, sharper than most men can see it. Men of courage, faithfulness, justice, humility, and mercy. And, I suspect they did what God expected them to do, and, as I remember the history, each respected and honored the other to the end.

John Andre was executed with tears!