

Because of the time I am to be gone from the pulpit I decided to conclude this series tonight. I had intended further studies, but these were to be specific ethical cases rather than, as up to this point, the principles of our ethics as Christians. The cases I had thought to consider we can consider at another time. Tonight I want to finish with a consideration of the higher standard of ethical living to which Christians are called. I want to remind you, as we conclude, that Christians are not simply called to a greater faithfulness in doing what everyone would regard as good and right, but are called to go far beyond that standard to meet obligations that few people in the world -- alas, including far too few Christians -- would accept as right, certainly as necessary.

I was in the line at a branch Post Office the other day, behind a lady who was buying stamps. When it came to be her turn she told the teller that the previous time in that office, some weeks before, she had somehow got away with a book of stamps for which he had not paid. It was an accident but when she got home she found she had these stamps. She didn't normally trade at this particular branch and did not live close to it, so she did go straight back, but now that she had returned she wanted to pay for the book she had been given before and to buy some more stamps.

Now that was certainly commendable of her and we would expect nothing less than the same honesty of any Christian. Dr. Schaeffer used to say that a Christian should be willing to go far out of his way to return a few pennies returned to him by mistake by a cashier. But, there are many who are not Christians who would say that the woman in the Post Office was simply doing her duty. All people should be honest and honorable in their affairs. That which does not belong to us and was given to us in error should be returned. There is nothing particularly controversial in that, however few there may be who would actually do it, even if they gave their assent to the principle.

As we said at the beginning of this series on ethics, Christians are not the only ones who think it right to be honest, chaste, faithful, merciful, and the like.

Now we have, to be sure, pointed out that honesty and chastity and faithfulness are not the same thing in Christian behavior that they are in the behavior of worldly people, though there is certainly a similarity. There is a distinctly Christian form of these behaviors and virtues and without that Christian form -- its motive and its manner as a service to God -- the worldly forms of honesty or chastity are all merely what Augustine called *peccata splendida*, "splendid sins." God looks upon the heart and measures our deeds according to our motives in a way we seldom do and never do to the searching degree that he always does.

Further, we have already pointed out those texts in the Gospels where the Lord Jesus lays us under obligations that the world neither accepts nor intends to meet: the love of enemies, the returning of blessing

for cursing, forgiveness and acts of kindness toward those who have mistreated us, and the like. Our Lord explicitly distinguished between the ethics of the world and the higher, more demanding standard he set for his followers: "if you love only those who love you, what do you do more than the pagans; even they love those who love them. Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect."

Let me, tonight, take you to another text like that: A text that lays us under the higher standard appropriate to a people whose service in life is not only offered to other men to be judged by them, but is offered to God to be judged by him, a God who has his own definite and specific interests in our living and who looks upon the heart and judges according to the motives and intentions of the heart. Our conduct must be different in striking ways precisely because we are Christians and because, therefore, our behavior must conform to our faith, to beliefs we have that the world does not.

The text is 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. **READ**

Now, what we have here is simply a specific application of the Lord's teaching to love our enemies, to refuse to seek or take vengeance but to leave our wellbeing in God's hands. What we have further in an instance of theological ethics: that is, a command to behave **in view of what we Christians know to be true**. God will judge the wicked, our vindication in this world matters little in comparison with that of the world to come, giving glory to God is magnificently more important than getting justice in this life, suffering indignity is an important way to follow and to honor the Lord who was mistreated far more terribly for us and for our salvation, and so on.

And so it is that we are told here that we should rather lose our money or in some other way permit other Christians to place us in a position of disadvantage than that we should in any way contribute to the dishonoring of God's name by taking a fellow Christian to a secular court.

Martin Lloyd Jones used to tell his congregation: "As you walk the streets of London, remember you have got the reputation of God in your hands." Well that fact has very important ethical implications and Paul spells one of them out here. Lose your shirt rather than bring the world's reproach on the church of God.

Interestingly, this matter came up at General Assembly. The policy that was being proposed for adoption concerning the PCA's "Service Mark" and its protection against infringement by unauthorized use on the Internet, etc., included a provision that read: "...before legal action is taken against a member of the PCA, ecclesiastical remedy shall be sought in the courts of the church." Some animated discussion followed, and, I am glad to say, the sentence in question was struck because, as more than one delegate pointed out, the Scripture forbids precisely what the committee was proposing it might do -- take a church member to court! [One prominent pastor, after

the action, rose to ask if that meant that if a member absconded with church funds we would not seek redress in the courts. The moderator, with tongue in his cheek, suggested that they could, but they would have to excommunicate the fellow first. Then he wouldn't be a Christian, you see.]

Now, the world does not accept this part of Christian ethics for itself [Though, so much is biblical ethics the true human ethics, for we are all made in God's image, there are vestiges even of this in human morality. William Kunstler used to say that he would not criticize friends of the revolution -- this, I remember, in connection with the genocide that Pol Pot conducted in Cambodia! The same principle horribly perverted!]

Now, I want to commend to you this higher standard and make you feel that it is right that God should ask such things of his people, that he should expect of them what the world considers far beyond reasonable requirements. But, I thought I could do that most effectively by describing the contrary: what it is like, what impression is left, how little God is glorified or the gospel adorned, when Christians behave like non-Christians, even non-Christians who would be considered honorable people by other non-Christians. I want to whet your appetite for living life "high above the ground" by reminding you of how much less we do for the Lord, how much less potent our witness is for him, when we accept the world's standard of ethics, however high, instead of reaching to the Lord's own standard, which is so much higher and so much more directly a consequence of our Christian faith, what he has told us is true, about which the world knows little or nothing.

And I thought I could do that most effectively by describing what have come to be typical behaviors **in the church and by the church herself** that fail to reach to this higher standard.

Let me give you just a few examples:

1. **The IRS has clear and definite rules** regarding what gifts are or are not tax-deductible, and these rules are broken by many churches all of the time.

Suppose you want to give a gift of money to a needy family in the church. You are not wanting credit and you are happy for the gift to be anonymous. So you approach a deacon and say that you would like to give so much to the deacons' fund and have that same amount then given to the family. Our deacons will tell you that they cannot receive such a gift. And the reason is this: gifts given to individuals are not tax-deductible, but gifts given to churches are.

If the church received your gift and then gave it, on your instructions, to an individual, it would be, in effect, laundering your money and giving you a tax-deduction you did not deserve. Now, you might say, "but I won't take a tax-deduction on that gift." Perhaps you would not. But the church is not permitted to receive your gift in any

case if its destination is not a tax-deductible destination.

But I know for a fact, from my own experience, that this rule is widely ignored in Christian churches. I wish it could be said by the IRS: "the one institution we never worry about is the Christian church. It is the one institution we deal with that is more scrupulous than we are in making sure that it is abiding by the law." But the IRS doesn't say that because, alas, it isn't true.

Now, I'm not saying that the tax law is always easy to interpret. We have had our long and sometimes difficult discussions in the councils of this church regarding whether we are practicing tax avoidance -- which is entirely proper -- or tax evasion -- which is illegal. But, we intend to abide by the laws of the land, however irritating those laws may be, because our Savior taught us to do so, until such time as those laws conflict with his.

[By the way: that is a challenge for individual Christians too. So much depends upon your honor in the matter of reporting your income, doesn't it? Are you reporting payments in kind, bartering that you do, as income as you should? And so on. Someone said to the Puritan Richard Rogers, "I admire you, Mr. Rogers, but you are so precise!" To which Rogers replied, "I serve a precise God!"]

**2. In the matter of pastoral changes, I dare say, our ethics as Christians often collapse.**

And that is true both for the church and the pastor.

1. In a case I know first hand, a church that wanted to be rid of its minister, made no effort to inform the church which was considering calling him of the serious doubts that they had of his character. He came to his new church and in a short time his conduct had scandalized the church, done real harm to its reputation and the Lord's. He is now out of the ministry and out of the Christian church. After all of this had happened, a year or two later, I happened to be sitting at lunch, during a General Assembly, with an elder from the church from which this pastor had come. In the course of our conversation he told me that by the end of his ministry there, the elders had come to believe that he had a drinking problem. But do you think they told that to the congregation to which he went when he left them. They wanted to get rid of their problem. The fact that he was soon to devastate another congregation did not, apparently, trouble them overmuch. Is this treating others as you would want to be treated yourself?

Or what of churches who need pastors and begin canvassing men whom they would like for themselves. Do they ask the churches involved if they may contact the minister? Rarely. Do they seek the permission of the elders or the Presbytery? Rarely. They

simply seek to entice a man away from his present congregation to them. They seek, in effect, to steal another church's minister, though they would put in terms of the Lord's will, etc. What is more, it is perfectly obvious, in this day and age, that when a happy pastorate is disrupted in this way, by the temptations of another call -- often for more money -- the church that loses its minister is genuinely harmed by the loss.

Does that seem to matter to the church looking to spirit away a man they want from the church where he presently is ministering.

Not much. This is corporate America after all: you have to look out for number one! This is capitalistic Christianity with a vengeance.

2. But, think of the conduct of pastors. Over and again this happens in the PCA. A congregation is living its life and doing its work. It thinks all is well. And then, suddenly, completely out of the blue, it discovers, not that its pastor is **thinking about** leaving for another church, but that he has already candidated, been called by another congregation, and is leaving next month and would like a month of severance pay to handle expenses during the transition.

This happens over and over again in our churches, and it is in no way the higher standard of life and behavior our Savior taught us. No wonder churches are weak and Christians ethically weak when its leaders behave, at points of critical interest to them, just like anyone else would act who had his own interests uppermost in mind. Is this being a person of the day? Is this treating others as you would want to be treated? Is this a fulfilling of all the obligations of a minister's vows as a matter of sacred honor before God and man? Is this putting the interests of others before one's own?

3. **But consider a matter of church politics as another example of the way the church is doing its business in this day just as the world does its business.**

Nominations for the PCA permanent committees and boards (MTW, MNA, Covenant College, etc.) are generated in the Presbyteries who send approved names to the GA Nominating Committee along with a statement of reasons why they feel their man should be considered for such a post. The nominating committee then selects one name for each vacancy from all the names submitted by Presbyteries.

Before the General Assembly the slate of candidates proposed by the Nominating Committee is placed before the commissioners. At the General Assembly, names may be placed in nomination **against** certain men whom the Nominating Committee had proposed for certain positions.

Most men are elected unopposed, but every year there are some nominated by the Nominating Committee who are opposed by a nomination from the floor. Sometimes, though by no means always, the floor nominees are a conscious effort to prevent a certain man with certain views from being elected to a position of influence in the church.

A month and a half ago, I was called by a prominent PCA pastor, representing a particular viewpoint in the church, asking if I would be willing to have my name placed in nomination **against** the name of a man from my own Presbytery for a particular committee of the church.

This other man, who had been nominated by the Nominating Committee, is perceived by this group as too far to the right and they didn't want him in a position of influence. Now what they thought of me in all of this I don't want to guess. What was I supposed to say to the man, **from my own Presbytery**, that I would have run against?

As the Stated Clerk of this Presbytery -- a fact this group knew well enough -- I was the man who had sent his nomination to the Nominating Committee; I was the man who had written up the case for his election! And now I was to run against him? I assured this pastor who called me that they had misread our man, that he was an honorable, wide-spirited, fair-minded minister who had, in his one experience of judicial process in our Presbytery shown himself quite capable of ruling against a man whose convictions were nearer to his own if justice required it.

All of that fell on deaf ears. At General Assembly a man of the group represented by the pastor who called me was nominated against our man and won the election.

Now is that love that believes all things, and hopes all things? Is that secret, backroom maneuvering the way of the kingdom of God and the people of the day? Is that being treated as you would like to be treated? Wouldn't the demands of honor at least require that they speak with the man they had their suspicions of but whom they had never met? Apparently not in the church today. [This is the kind of behavior, by the way, that keeps so many suspicious of one another in the church.]

No, my friends. We are supposed to behave differently than the world, very differently. And if, following the Lord's way, seems at times to place us at a disadvantage, well, what is that to us. Our confidence is in the Lord's approval not our manipulations: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his Righteousness and all these things shall be added to you." And, if in fact we suffer loss because we won't take the action that might get us gain, what is that. Our task in this world is not to build up treasure here, that will soon be lost, but to store it up in heaven, where it will be ours forever. Do we believe these things? Are we Christians in fact? Well, then, let us behave as such and distinguish ourselves by that faith and by the way of living that comes from it.