

The Life-style of A Believer

A Prolegomenon on Christian Ethics

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Right and proper conduct is for a person to live according to the principles of God's rightly divided Word. These principles set forth in God's Word are the bases of Christian ethics, or if you prefer, the believer's life-style. All Christian ethics are found in the Word of God, specifically in those Church Epistles addressed to the born-again body of believers, as well as the scriptural records of the person of Jesus Christ and of other men and women in the Word whose lives manifested these principles.

This essay is intended to be a prolegomenon, a basic introduction, on the topic of ethics for believers. If the principle of our position is accepted that the Word of God is the will of God and is the ultimate authority in the field of ethics, then the logical deductions will be even more firmly established than the facts of any science because they are based on unchanging truth.

Different premises cause different systems of ethics. Therefore, recognition of our stated premise is essential to understanding and accepting the system of ethics based upon it. Technically, ethics is the science of conduct, producing a defined result. The word "ethics" means the science of morals. "Ethics" is from the Greek *ēthika*, which is derived from *ēthos*, meaning custom or habit. The word "morals" comes from Latin, *moralis*. The goal of a code of ethics is to help people live virtuously, morally, uprightly—in order to manifest the more abundant life.

I believe it is possible, if we accept the premise that the Bible is our ultimate authority, that we can collect a body of specific truths of universal application. From this single premise we have produced a coherent system of general Biblical principles applicable to all believers who want to follow the accuracy of the Word. The study of this system of principles is the "science of ethics." Living the principles is the "art of ethics."

Ethics is an applied and directive science, teaching man how he ought to behave. It is not a natural or descriptive science. In all other sciences except ethics, values are arbitrarily imposed by man's desire and vantage point. Therefore, scientists start from different premises with different understanding, due to rearing, habit, personal taste, exposure. Premises are seldom settled upon by logic. People simply choose a particular premise. In our case, we choose the premise that the Bible is the only and ultimate authority. What is "right" is what God's Word says is right. What is "wrong" is what God's Word says is wrong. Likewise with "good" and "evil." The definition of terms dealing with ethics must be in agreement with God's Word. We must always define our terms, think clearly and logically, and use plain, simple language.

The more searching our analysis of the Word and the more accurate our understanding of the Word, the more insights we will gain into the true nature of man. Therefore, the more we know of the Word, the more complete, satisfactory, and detailed our science of ethical behavior will be.

Moral or ethical progress generally fails to keep pace with material and intellectual progress. Thus, man is usually not morally or ethically good enough for the task to which he is called because of his lack of true knowledge of the Word of God, or lack of desire to believe God's Word.

A major difference between the precepts of ethics and of all other sciences lies in the hypothetical precepts of the form: if you desire such and such a result, you follow such and such a method. In contrast, however, the precepts of Christian ethics are categorical or absolute precepts or imperative in the essence of "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not."

According to jurisprudence, a law is a command to do or refrain from doing something issuing from a competent authority. Our competent and sole authority is the Bible, the Word of God, rightly divided. Thus, in Christian ethics the commands, laws, and rules are categorical, such as found in Isaiah 30:21: ". . . This *is* the way, walk ye in it. . . ."

The conduct or behavior of an animal is prescribed by its physical constitution, its animal nature. Biologically, man, *Homo sapiens*, is an animal. However, when a person is a Christian, he or she is more than a physical and mental being; he or she has a spiritual side, which no other animal—human or beast—has.

Instinct is for man and animals an innate psychological, psychophysical, mental disposition which leads to action in a certain way. The will, emotions, and reason, while all single entities, are unified in one person who is body, soul, and spirit. A man's intellect is the whole person thinking; his will is the whole person choosing; his emotions are the whole person liking or disliking. A man's belief and conduct are indissolubly bound together as roots, trunk, limbs, branches, twigs, and fruit are organically connected to one tree. His thinking is done in the light of his own interests.

Conscience is a moral awareness established within us by the habit patterns we have formed due to previous teaching. A person may be honest and sincere yet narrow and prejudiced. A man may know a statement to be true, yet deliberately desire to disagree, or, being weak in desire, settle for less than the truth.

A man cannot be argued into agreement on the Word of God, ethics, or anything else. One person may appeal to and even convince another by logical argumentation and reasoning so that the one feels obligated to admit that the other is right, according to a specific definition, yet he does not will to do what is right. On the other hand, he may desire to do what is right, but being weak of will or of renewed mind, he may fail to bring his good desires into concretion. In other words, men cannot be argued or forced into agreeing on opinion or virtue.

There is no sphere of human activity where ethics is not involved. Whenever men continue to choose evil when they know good, that choice will always be spirit influenced. Ethics determines what is best. However, there are circumstances where what is best or right is not always possible. Each situation must be judged on its own merit and, above all, the motive must be considered.

There are three basic propositions for man in this life:

1. Man is born to live for the glory of God.
2. Man is to be born again and come to a knowledge of God's Word so as to effectively witness to the glory of God.
3. Every man is an individual in himself and is never a means to another man's end.

There are five categories of duty for a Christian believer:

1. The believer's duty to God
2. The believer's duty to himself
3. The believer's duty to the household
4. The believer's duty to the family
5. The believer's duty to society (unbelievers)

The presence of God is man's "natural environment," man as he ought to be.

ETHICS AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The education and discipline of the mind according to the accuracy of God's Word is the highest education of all intellectual powers. Man must so educate his will and desires that he becomes the master in the tabernacle of his own being. He must educate his mind to love good and abhor evil, and educate his intellect so that he has a coherent system of true beliefs.

There are five basic types of judgments which a man can make: truth judgments, ethical judgments, expediency judgments, esthetic judgments, and judgments of fact. Unity, certainty, and stability are qualities of life which every man should desire to attain.

The teaching that "the end justifies the means" is ethically wrong. Arguments of immediate expediency, failing to evaluate the total situation in a moral light, are erroneous. No human being is ever a means to another's end. Every man counts for one and no man for more than one.

Greed in a man's life is the desire for exclusive possession. "Enough" for most men is more than they have. Men's hearts are generally set on material acquisitions, but in practice happiness depends less on what they have than on what others have and they have not. A person never feels the lack of material things of which he or she has no knowledge.

Mere possessions give no lasting pleasure. There is a great new freedom once man has, by his will, released himself from the "wheel of things," "the Jones syndrome," and shaken himself loose from the tyranny of possessions. Man's basic human nature has the desire to possess. Lust, greed, and rage are all perversions. Sadism is a fruit of lust and unrestrained greed, and its outcome is hatred and bitterness. God's Word says that no one is at liberty just to please himself. He must sublimate his desire for individual possession until it becomes a desire to serve in love and to develop to the utmost this service for others rather than himself.

Moral judgments must be passed on motives rather than on actions. Self-discipline with a view to obtaining self-mastery is

a requirement. Man must become master in the tabernacle of his own being. Seeking to define clearly when the gratification of a bodily desire becomes sinful is extraordinarily difficult. To say that excess indulgence alone is sinful, simply shifts the difficulty from one point to another. You are left with the question, what constitutes excess? Desire should be simple. The zest of living is increased by simplicity, even in food. In many of the richest, fullest, deepest, and most vital lives passion plays a great part; but passion must be curbed, restrained, and controlled. Passion must be a servant, not master of a man's life.

Duty is what one ought to do. Duty is the law applied to individuals. Duty deals with purpose, aim, and reason for conduct. A man's willful decision toward duty determines his virtue. Virtue is a man's fixed attitude toward his ideal. There are circumstances under which clear and plain duties conflict, and we have to choose at times which duty to perform and which to neglect. It is ethically wrong to worry about things beyond our control. Ethics claims to determine what is right. It does not profess, however, to show that under all circumstances what is right or best is always possible. Each case has to be judged on its own merit, and above all, the motive of the heart must be considered.

Before we harshly judge an act, we must judge the motive. Illustration: cutting off a man's leg. What is the motive is the important question. A good man is the one whose heart is set on virtue. A bad man is the one whose heart is set on just the opposite.

Galatians 5:19-21:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

The four cardinal virtues of Plato are wisdom, courage or fortitude, temperance or self-control, and justice. Aristotle, retaining Plato's four virtues, added six more, namely: liberality,

high-mindedness, gentleness, friendliness, truthfulness, and decorous wit. The seven deadly sins listed by the Roman Catholic church are: pride, anger, sloth, sensuality, avarice, gluttony, and envy.

Virtue as defined by the Word of God can be seen in Isaiah 11:2, referring to the coming Messiah, and is described in part by the fruit of the spirit of Galatians 5.

Isaiah 11:2:

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

Galatians 5:22 and 23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

The ability to arrive at an intelligent decision between alternative courses of action takes a knowledge of God's Word. Godliness is God-likeness or goodness. "Fear of the Lord" is reverence for Him.

Virtues of Christ: Matthew 5:1-16

Virtues of Paul: Philippians 4:8; Galatians 5:22 and 23;
I Corinthians 13; Colossians 3:12-15

Virtues of Peter: II Peter 1:5-8

Works of the flesh: Romans 1:29-31; Galatians 5:19-21

When alone, most people do not control what they will or will not think about. They daydream, "float along," even fantasize. However, there is a duty of disciplined thinking. The power to determine what you will think about and what you will not think about is a valuable aid in resisting temptation. Do not allow mental, moral, or spiritual deterioration. Have knowledge of yourself. Know where you are and redirect yourself to a fuller life.

There is a matter of callous indifference which must also be dealt with in ethics. The Bible refers to the person who is callously indifferent as one who has a "conscience seared with a hot iron" or one who refuses to "abhor that which is evil." Pleasure is not always good. For example, when a person has

had his or her mind seared with a hot iron regarding sexual matters, the last stages of vice have been reached, namely homosexuality. It is the lowest form of sexual vice.

Suicide is a violation of the law of individualism. Life is a trust which is given to us to use. Suicide is an act of selfishness. It leaves the living to suffer. Suicide is usually an act of cowardice. Suicide is presumptuous. Suicide is spirit possession.

The individual has a right to defend himself, just as does the state. Under no system of ethics is it held that the duty of any man is to allow himself to be killed rather than to protect himself. Nor is man to allow himself to be despoiled of his possessions rather than to resist.

Living in this world, we have to take this world as we find it and resolutely endeavor to act as virtuously as possible in every situation, striving always to choose the better of two or more alternatives and to make it a better world in which to live. Though we may not be perfect in this world, we must strive to be as perfect as possible.

A pin has a head which keeps it from going too far. A pin is straight, which enables it to stand upright; it is polished—cultured, educated. Finally, it's got a point so it can get somewhere. Sketch on the canvas of your mind the sort of man you ought to be, and in a given time you will become that man.

No man willing to face the truth will deny the positive effects of the new birth and the renewed mind. The Christian believer is in a position of self-realization because God places in the believer's hands the ability to make decisions according to God's Word. Each man's future is fashioned by means of his own conscious selection and rejection. This is the very essence of determining what will become of an individual. It is the artistic production of one's own life.

SERVICE

One of the greatest activating principles of human life is the motivation to serve. The principle of service is more powerful than that of financial rewards. A believer's ethics include both love (*agapē*, love of God in the renewed mind) and service.

Man has free will, and is therefore spiritually and morally responsible for his conduct. Man's free will places in his hands the responsibility to direct his own life. To the extent that a man willfully determines to make God's will his will, he will find himself a *doulos*, bonded slave of the Lord Jesus Christ according to the inherent and inerrant accuracy of God's Word. Being a "slave"—living a life of service and commitment—produces the greatest attainable freedom. Such a paradox!

A true man will have superb confidence in his own inspiration, desire, and ability. Men who hear the "call of God" most clearly are most likely to easily justify the sacrifice they make in following it. The man who hears the call clearly enough, yet decides not to sacrifice himself—his own ease and comfort—is rightfully condemned.

The duty of service includes the responsibility of sacrifice because that service which costs us nothing is valueless. Self-sacrifice, the giving of oneself completely, is the passion of great men—most vividly exemplified in Jesus Christ. Self-sacrifice must be a part of the ministry of The Way for every believer.

In the principle of the ethics of sacrifice is this truth: that mankind can have nothing for which someone is not prepared to pay the price. Sacrifice demands that someone have great commitment.

There is also the principle that each man has his appropriate status and duties. The truth that all born-again believers are of equal value in the eyes of God does not indicate that every man must necessarily do the same work or receive the same education or be paid the same wages. But it does indicate that all good work in every profession or sphere is honorable.

The return of Christ, as set forth in the Scriptures of Truth, gives man a motive, a reason for action, making every believer's life worthwhile, which brings forth the life of a *doulos*, the highest type of heroism.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

It is axiomatic that a Christian order of society implies Christian men and women. To alter any situation in our society there must be a sufficient number of people who want it altered, who care enough about a given issue to make the sacrifices necessary to bring about change. The first step in all social change is a strong public opinion, the education of the public mind.

Whenever a society chooses to use men, we must not be surprised to have moral problems to which there are no solutions. There is no right course available then, but merely a choice of the lesser evils.

There are moral problems to which there are no apparent solutions in this world because of man. There sometimes appears to be no really right course of action under utterly unnatural conditions. If the highest good is possible for man now, then our highest duty is obviously to act so as to make the highest good possible for future generations.

Society must be based on the sanctity of private property and of the individual. There should be some form of strong and stable government, making the practice of morality possible. The state recognizes the right to hold property. The individual has a moral as well as a legal right to property and to the exercise of all the rights attached to it. But it must also bring the maximum good for the community as a whole. Ethically, property is a trust.

For its efficient working, a republic needs a majority in the nation of good and strong citizens. Our present-day moral codes are frequently irrational in the highest sense of ethics. The greatest hindrance to advancement towards any reform is that we have not enough good men and women to speak up and stand to effect change.

If a thing is harmful to public morals, it should be prohibited no matter what others consider to be its artistic value. On the other hand, to forcibly suppress the expression of unpopular views produces the impression that no adequate argument can be found with which to refute them. Truth has nothing to fear.

The real unit of society is the family, not the individual. Marriage is a partnership in which each partner gives himself or herself wholly to the other. Marriage is manifestly unequal if a man demands the whole of a woman's being—body, soul, and spirit—in return for no more than a share of himself. Likewise with the woman.

Divorce usually starts at the cradle. In a society where there is no strong Christian public opinion, a just solution to the problem of divorce seems unattainable. There is nothing like "injustice for the innocent party" for there is no innocent party. Probably there is no Christian solution to the problem of divorce because a Christian solution involves Christian men and women in a Christian society, acting in a Christian way. But the great majority of men and women are scarcely more than nominal Christians and our society is, in many respects, non-Christian. The ideal state of things would obviously be for the standard of the Word to be the standard of the state. But the standards of morality set forth in God's Word and the standards acceptable to the state are diverging more and more widely. To deter such a divergence must be primary. The man of low mentality always, and the clever criminal usually, are made worse by our current systems.

To suggest that a sexual pervert is more to be pitied than blamed, and that, by nature, he has a right to live his own life by his own natural instincts, is in itself a perversion. Perhaps it would be wise to treat him as insane, as we would treat a homicidal maniac or kleptomaniac.

Speech enables us to communicate ideas. Art enables us to communicate emotion. Music, perhaps the purest of all the arts, enables us to convey the highest and purest emotion. Art is judged by the success or lack of success with which the desired emotion is conveyed. Ethics, however, must determine whether the emotion evoked or conveyed is one which should be.

Art is for the sake of enriching and elevating human life, stimulating emotion and honor. Art is never for art's sake but for man's sake. That which enriches life in one way only at the cost of impoverishing it in another must be condemned.

An ideal inspires imagination, organizes human urges and instincts, and stimulates the will, thus determining the direction of our character and activities.

It is right in society for every job to offer a full, interesting, and useful life for the believer, and the opportunity for the free development of the individual. The worker must take an interest, a pride in his work and exercise his greatest ability to develop his total life. Christianity touches every sphere of man's activities. To be immeasurably happier and healthier, a man must have freedom in getting and spending, giving and serving.

Gambling is trying to get something for nothing. It is the distinctive vice of a degenerating age and nation, as are alcohol and drugs. Gambling is a transaction between two parties whereby the transfer of something of value is made dependent on chance in such a way that the whole gain of one party equals the whole loss of the other. There is no increase of wealth. All that one party gains is gained at the expense of the other. A gamble is an attempt to gain something without rendering any return. Gambling is a sin against God, self, neighbor, and society and increases appallingly the amount of waste, misery, and crime. The state should never be involved.

The argument that a raffle is merely helping a good cause, nobody really caring whether he wins or not, is erroneous logic. All gambling makes its appeal to the base passion of greed and when this passion is fed, it strikes against the very root of the corresponding virtue, the virtue of giving.

There are three things that justify a man's taking money from another person:

1. The law of exchange: that one person gives another money in exchange for merchandise
2. The law of service: that one person gives another service in exchange for money
3. The law of love: that one person out of love freely gives money to another who has freely and willingly given to him

The basic essence of ethical business is competition for the best service. Working people must give their best service. Sloth

is a very dangerous vice and, if habitually yielded to, brings about the fatal destruction of character of a person. (See Proverbs 12:24; 13:4; 15:19; 18:9.)

The state takes no cognizance of private sin until it becomes a public crime. When the state takes cognizance of anything morally wrong, it should always be to check and punish; never to regulate, much less encourage it, still less to derive any revenues from it. The argument that man will sin, and that it is the duty of the state for its own sake and for the sake of the innocent third parties, and even for the offender's own sake, to take precautions so that as little evil may result as possible, is an erroneous concept of logic and is unethical. It is never the duty of the state to make the way of transgressors safe and easy. The action of every state, when it acts, must be to restrain and to punish, never to organize or license vice, or crime, and still less to derive a revenue from it on what they refer to as the grounds of expediency. Make punishment follow closely after the crime. Extended judgment injustice is usually fraught with error.

The solution to ethical questions regarding economic problems, mineral wealth, and such (which many times is handled by the state or large corporations) is often nothing more than "legalized robbery" dealing with the masses rather than the individual.

By a solution in ethics I mean a true adjustment to the various interests which could then be made the subject of legislation. A satisfactory solution can only be looked for in a Christian society in which Christian men behave in a Christian manner.

In all industry for production, two things are needed: namely, labor (workers) and capital (stored money). Thus, logically, those who labor and those who supply the capital should both share in the fruits of production.

As civilizations bring along new comforts, new conveniences, new ways, they also bring with them ways in which man can annoy his neighbor. Airports are only one illustration of many. This too becomes an ethical consideration.

The rights of citizenship necessarily involve duties of citizenship, and so move into the field of ethics. Therefore, politics

must also be considered in any study of ethics. A man may be adequately fed, clothed, and amused, yet remain no better than an animal.

Morally, under God, a government of the people, by the people and for the people, even at the cost of many failures is preferable to any “perfect” government by any kind of arbitrary tyrant. Men should rather desire to make a complete wreck of their own affairs than to have their lives controlled by the most well-meaning, benevolent dictator. No material wealth, no national power or prosperity can compensate for the surrender of one’s own right to choose. Of all governmental systems, a republic best sustains and preserves this right for man. However, if a great proportion of the people of a republic display a greed for enjoyment with disregard for the rights and happiness of others, and a lack of self-discipline and sense of duty, a republic becomes unworkable.

CONCLUSION

Christian ethics is the science of conduct which is consciously and purposefully directed action for a desired result according to the principles of God’s Word. This prolegomenon is intended to bring to light a coherent system of Biblical guidelines applicable to all men who are believers and who will follow the accuracy of the Word. This is the science of Biblical ethics.

The art of ethics discusses the “how” of the application of God’s moral laws, rules, or guidelines to specific classes, and how they must be modified at times by special conditions and circumstances. There is no sphere of human activity where ethics is not involved. Thus we need to carefully consider ethics and its application in every sphere of our life: in relation to God, to one’s self, to society, and to government.

Supplemental Reading

MacKenzie, J.S., *The Manual of Ethics*
Robinson, N.L., *Christian Justice*
Sidgwick, Henry, *The Methods of Ethics*
Sidgwick, Henry, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*
Thornton, L.S., *Conduct and the Supernatural*

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