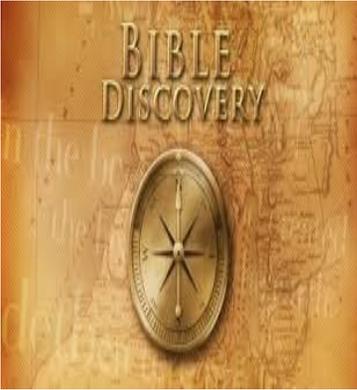


Ethics & Morality in Today's Church



There are many, especially today, who think ethics has no role to play in our faith. That's because, as they see it, salvation comes by faith – *“faith from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”*. [Romans 10:17] For those who follow this view, their justification is faith makes moral behaviour and ethics meaningless. Certainly before we can draw people to believe, there must be something for them to believe. That something is the word of God, which we're to share and they will hear. But do not such words demand a response – not only with our conversion but also with our conduct? As Matthew Henry instructs, *“The gospel is given, not only to be known and believed, but to be obeyed. It's not a system of notions, but a rule of practice. The beginning, progress, and strength of faith is by hearing. But it is only hearing the word, as the word of God that will strengthen faith.”*

Does this mean we blindly follow every example from God's word? Is it advantageous to emulate the cruelty of the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who rebelled against God? Do we error like so many of even the closest companions of God in the name of biblical ethics? The argument is often given that the Bible offers so many negative examples of human behaviour; that God even promotes *“evil behaviour”* in his commands so that modern humankind must not adhere to such teachings any longer. For instance, *“Why did God command the extermination and genocide of the Canaanites, Hittites, and Amorites, etc, - women and children included?”* As we look at difficult issues such as this one, we must first remember God's ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts [Isaiah 55:9; Romans 11:33-36]. The simple answer is we're to be willing to trust God and have faith in Him even when we don't understand His ways.

To more fully understand, we examine God's word and see that through Moses God commanded, *“In the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them — the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites — as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God”* [Deuteronomy 20:16-18]. Do you see God's sound reasoning? The Israelites failed to obey with the result exactly what God said would happen occurring.

[Judges 2:1-3; 1 Kings 11:5; 14:24; 2 Kings 16:3-4] God didn't order the extermination of these people to be cruel, but to prevent even greater evil from occurring in the future. While it's difficult to follow these commands from God in a different time than ours especially when ordered the death of children and infants as well, we can understand the children weren't innocent. The psalmist David wrote, *“Surely I was sinful at birth”* [Psalm 51:5] and again, *“Even from birth the wicked go astray”* [Psalm 58:3]. These children would grow as adherents of the evil religions and practices of their parents. They'd have grown being hating the Israelites, seeking revenge. Remember God looks from an eternal perspective with ways higher than ours. Thankfully, today through God's

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graciousness we have the blood of Christ to sustain us and draw all from the world convincing them of Christ's wonderful love. Everyone, regardless of background is welcome to come and find salvation in Jesus. God is just, righteous, holy, loving, merciful, and gracious. His character may be a mystery to us – but we can depend on it that God's exactly who the Bible proclaims Him to be - worthy of our praise, rightfully the One to trust and follow.

Again the Bible is accused of an evil stance for women and slavery, taken out of context, which lends itself to supporting the ill treatment of women and the enslavement of others. Dr. David Jeremiah writes, *“The error is in attributing these (evil practices) to the practice of valid Christianity. They were inflicted in the name of Christianity, but by people who had departed from Christian principles and teachings.”* Rather than focus on the errors of some, let us see the cultural changes allowing women to become equal, the release of slaves

through the guiding hand of God's spirit in the hearts of God's many people; let us see the forgiving hearts of those who follow Jesus even when the worst of atrocities is brought against them. Even in the day of Paul, women were elevated, slaves were considered "brothers" deserving of forgiveness equality was a completely different equation from that of the world. The New Testament generally asserts all morality flows from the Great Commandment, to love God with all one's heart, mind, strength, and soul, and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Christ united these Old Testament commands and proposed Himself as the model of such love. In fact, Christian ethics is built on Christ's love for us being through Biblical scripture which is why as Baptists we have always considered God's word profitable to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness.

You may remember the WWJD bracelets popular a few years ago. I believe we even passed them out here at *Mt Brydges Baptist Church*. Its origin came from Charles Sheldon's 1896 book, *In His Steps*, subtitled "What Would Jesus Do" proposing the question in the form of a novel. Today, the question remains as a reminder that our belief requires us in turn to act through a moral imperative in a manner which demonstrates Christ's love for us and our love of Jesus through our actions with one another and others around us.

Dr. Christoph Stückelberger Professor of Ethics at the Theological Faculty of the University of Basle Switzerland while attending Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, 21 August 2003 was asked, "Is ethics important for the Christian faith and if so, why?" Let me share some of the key points he addressed in answering this question.

1. God acts on our behalf prior to our accepting Him. Paul tells us while we were still sinners Christ died for our sins. So, we don't start with our own action, because our action is only a re-action to God's action. It's important for Christian ethics to underline God acts long before we do anything.
2. Stückelberger suggests the second reason for the importance of ethics is the following formula:



Grace + Faith + Behaviour = Salvation

- This doesn't mean there's more to salvation than what we've always been taught. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ; a faith that comes through God's amazing grace. However, it does mean that though, we as human beings make the distinction between faith and behaviour, first we believe and then we act, for God that is one. So it's only our human limitation that makes the distinction. Of course, we confess "justification by faith", but the ethical behaviour is the logical consequence of God's grace and our faith. Faith without a corresponding behaviour is an empty faith, a meaningless faith. Grace is what God offers to us. It includes forgiveness. Forgiveness is an important part of liberation. With forgiveness, we are each free to act and take responsibility even when we fail to act according to God's will. That's partially why some Christians fear they could make mistakes here and there: "I don't want to act because I could become guilty." That's wrong! God invites us to have ethical behaviour as consequence of His grace and His forgiveness – not our perfection! Let us let Him lead us and trust Him daily!
3. The Greek New Testament word "*metanoia*" means to turn around, to reverse; to change in one's way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion. It's a new orientation of the whole life in all its dimensions. It means we change the direction of our thinking, our spirit, our body and our material existence. A new existence means: all that we are is new including our behaviour. Remember "***the old has passed away, all things have become new...***"



Let us see the forgiving hearts of those who follow Jesus even when the worst of atrocities is brought against them.

Ethical behaviour is the logical consequence of God's grace and our faith!

Dr. Christoph Stückelberger goes on to explain,

“The Bible is not abstract on ethics. Augustine once said: ‘Love – and then do whatever you want.’ In a way that is a very true sentence: love is the most important expression of Christian ethics. If we love, we will behave in a right manner. But then, immediately the question follows: love – what does it mean? In today’s China, in Nanjing, in Switzerland, in Britain or in South Africa? We therefore need help to know what it means to love. The Bible gives very concrete examples for it: With the Ten Commandments, with the Sermon on the mountain and with a lot of other texts.”

As Christians our faith is anchored in God as both creator and Saviour, and He is our King of kings. Nothing exists but through the way and choice of our Heavenly Father. As that exists to the world at large, it also applies to every aspect of my life – and your life. We’re called to respond to God’s grace recognizing His plan for our lives is worthy of such response, that every aspect of His kingdom is built and guided by His hand; we need not be afraid. God invites us to join Him as He leads us along. This isn’t a profession of “ethical theology” reducing God’s teaching to a philosophy or legalistic pursuit. It’s admitting we’re called to respond in faith to His gift of grace and mercy given to us through Christ Jesus our Lord which then propels us, compels us, to life ethically and morally in Him through His Holy Spirit guiding us in the example of Jesus.

*Blessings,
Pastor Dave*

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