

## “TOWARD A CHRISTIAN ETHIC”

**a sermon on Micah 6:1-8, I Corinthians 1:18-31, and Matthew 5:1-12  
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One of the requirements in my seminary curriculum was a course called “Christian Ethics.” I remember being very surprised by the subject matter of the course, which was not at all what I had expected. I was expecting a course on what could better be called, “*ministerial* ethics.”

I knew that my brother, for instance, had been required to take such a course in medical school – a course that laid out the “rules of conduct” for physicians. I knew that law students and those in various other professions had such courses as well. And although I suspected that a course on “Christian Ethics” would be somewhat more broad than just the “ethics for Church professionals” part, I certainly expected that topic to be *included* as part of the course.

It wasn’t – although later on in our required coursework in pastoral care, we dealt with things like keeping appropriate “boundaries,” and “pastoral confidences.” And in the last 35 or so years *since* I entered seminary – in the aftermath of many lawsuits brought against clergy in our ever increasingly litigious society – requirements for both seminarians and even ordained ministers to complete courses in the prevention of sexual misconduct and harassment and the like have become regular practice.

But my seminary course in “Christian Ethics” had nothing at all to do with that. Ethics, in a seminary setting, is a particular branch of theological studies that focuses not on who God is, but on what God wants us to do.

The starting point in Christian Ethics is usually the Ten Commandments, or the “Decalogue,” as Ethicists usually refer to them. The Decalogue is a clear and simple ethical statement. Do these things, and you will be doing the will of God. Obey these rules, and you will be righteous in God’s sight.

But as the community very quickly learned, those ten statements *by themselves* weren’t enough. They needed some serious explanation. For instance, what if I murder someone *accidentally*? Or, what if someone *accuses* me of

stealing, but I didn't do it? Or, what if my *child*, or my *servant* breaks a law? Am I responsible for their actions?

And so the remainder of the book of Exodus and much of the book of Leviticus answer questions like those – questions that arose (presumably) in the course of time, as Israel “lived” with the Decalogue. And then, as the centuries went on, the leaders of the nation *continued* to pile on interpretations of the laws until by late Old Testament times, there were literally *thousands* of individual interpretations and applications of the original Ten Commandments.

And so in the development of ethics, words like those of the prophet Micah were *welcomed* words – *simplifying* words, that sought to establish what might be called an “ethical *principle*” to be applied in future ethical decision making: “What does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah's point, in the passage that ends with those words, is that all the sacrifices in the world are not of value if we are not at least *trying* to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. But the prophet's formula is useful beyond its original intent. It can become a sort of personal “motto” for us – something like my old civic club's motto – the Rotary Club “four way test of the things we think, do, or say,” which is intended to be used as a “measuring stick” for Rotarians to use in “measuring” their words and actions: “Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build good will and better friendships? Is it beneficial to all concerned?” If the answer to any of the questions is “no,” then we should re-think our plan of action.

So with Micah's little formula. Is it just? Is it kind (or merciful)? Does it represent humility before God, rather than arrogance or conceit? Not a bad ethic, and certainly good advice.

But there is a problem with “ethical principles.” They too eventually need interpretation and elaboration – just as the Decalogue needed to be explained and applied. Sooner or later, every “simple” ethic falls short.

Now all of that is really “background information” for approaching our main text of the morning – the beginning of Jesus' famous “Sermon on the Mount,” recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus, you recall, also articulated an ethical principle – his summary of the law, “on which,” he said, “depend[s] all the law and the prophets.” It was a restatement of two verses from the Old Testament law –

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

But when people think of Jesus and “ethics,” they most often turn to the Sermon on the Mount, because in the context of that proclamation, Jesus presents his whole ethical “system,” which defies being described in a simple *formula*. He begins with the “beatitudes” (which is from the Latin word for *blessing* or *happiness*). In one of his thousand or so books (!), Robert Schuller called them the “Be-Happy Attitudes,” and while I don’t think Jesus’ intention was to say that people who are poor in spirit, or meek, or merciful will necessarily “be happy,” I *do* think Jesus was trying very hard to question the conventional wisdom of his day about good and ethical living being a matter of following a then very complex and convoluted set of *rules*, and I think Schuller was right in characterizing Jesus’ teaching as being about “attitudes.”

Being ethical isn’t just a matter of “playing by the rules.” That was his point. Christian ethics means going *beyond*, doing *more*, daring to *question*, and being not just “ok,” but *really pure in heart* – pure in *motive*, and not just in *action*. It means taking a more *subjective* approach to life, rather than a purely *objective* one. It means being willing to be *moved*.

The core message of the beatitudes – with which Jesus *began* his discussion of ethics – is that God will stand on the side of those who allow the people and the situations they encounter in life to *affect* them – who don’t just learn to follow a set, objective number of “rules,” but who learn to *interpret* life through the filters of “blessedness” and “goodness.”

As an example, Jesus then took several of the “laws” in the Decalogue, and demonstrated how to reinterpret them by his new principle. “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘you shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But *I* say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

Now, as a *law*, that would be completely unenforceable. But the problem with laws is that you can *follow* them, without *believing* them, or agreeing with their *underlying principles* at all. You can obey them (at least, if they are simple

enough laws) by “rote,” and not by *attitude*. It isn’t that the Decalogue is wrong, or bad, it’s that in order to *really* follow those rules, you have to *live* them. You have to delve into *why* they are important. In the case of killing or murdering, you have to come to grips with what it means that God *values* life and relationships, and then *you* have to learn to value life and relationships. *That* is what it means, according to Jesus, to obey the commandment to not kill!

By the end of my seminary course in Christian Ethics, I had come to understand why the professors didn’t want their course to become a “ministerial ethics” course, in which they “laid down the law” about what ordained ministers can and cannot “do” in the practice of their ministry. They didn’t want to do that because Christian Ethics is not a set of laws. It is a *perspective* - an *attitude* of caring and concern for others, of respect for the planet that God has entrusted to our care, and of commitment to the work of the church, and the betterment of society. It is a willingness to become *engaged* with life, and it is a constant process of interpreting and evaluating events in light of the Good News of God’s grace.

Yes, we still need rules. We need ministerial ethics, and medical ethics, and the law of the state, and the rules of disciples and the form of government of the church. But we need to understand that the life of faith is not simply the careful following of all those rules and regulations and laws. It is the *understanding* of them, and their *purpose*, and it is striving to attain their *spirit* and *intent*, rather than just following their *letters*.

“Blessed,” Jesus said, “are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

Much has been written (a good bit of it by comedians) about the Southern expression, “bless your heart.” What I love about that expression is that at its best (and especially in the third person), it puts whatever “facts” about a person’s life or character that have just been revealed . . . or that are *about* to be revealed . . . into the “context” of the larger community. “Bless his heart, he just can’t pass that entrance exam” means “he is one of us, and no entrance exam can change that.”

I don’t think that is so far from Jesus’ point. Knowing that you are blessed creates the “context” in which you live, and work, and struggle to do the right thing, to love God, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

You and I are children of God – *blessed* children of God, and as we learn to hunger and thirst for what is right, *we will be satisfied*. That isn’t a dream, or a wish, or even a hope. It is a *promise* – our Lord’s promise that in Jesus Christ,

God's grace sets us free from the *bondage* of the law, so that we can live *even more fully* into God's purposes and intent for our lives.

To God be the glory.