

The Subject Matter of Ethics

Welcome to Christian Ethics. If I were to assign a course verse to this class, it would be Philippians 1:9-11. I would like to begin this session with Paul's prayer for the Philippians, making it our own prayer. Let me pick up just a little bit of the context by starting to read with verse 3. Paul writes this to the Philippians:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern the things that are excellent and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Let us pray together.

Father, we make this prayer our own for this course: that as we study and learn, our love may abound more and more in knowledge and insight; that our own lives may show forth the excellencies of You who have called us out of darkness into Your marvelous light; that we may be discerning; and that we may be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through our union with our Savior. These things we ask in His blessed name. Amen.

Our first topic is the subject matter of ethics. It is a way of introduction to the field, and to this course in particular. What is all this? What is it all about? Whenever I meet somebody new and they ask me what I do, I tell them I teach at Covenant Seminary. And invariably the question comes back, "What do you teach?" And I resist the temptation to say students, and I admit that I teach theology and ethics. I get one of two predictable responses. Either the person's eyes glaze over, they are suddenly thirsty for the punch bowl, and we move on to other things, or their eyes brighten and they present me with some ethical issue that they have been thinking about. It could be something in the news. "What about cloning? Is that right?" And I try to answer the best I can. They are thinking of ethics in terms of rules of conduct, and they want to know how the rules apply. That is the first thing that comes to people's minds when they are thinking about ethics: its rules and how they apply in the complex circumstances of life.

My wife and I have friends who moved to Georgia after the husband retired, and they come back from time to time to visit because they have contacts here. Last time they came back we went out to our favorite Japanese restaurant for a meal together. And as we were sitting there they were telling us about life in Georgia. Georgia has a lottery and they use the money for education. There are these great scholarships that are available in Georgia through that way of raising money. And as the wife is telling us this, she is reflecting out loud, and she says, "You know, is it right to oppose state-run lotteries, as a matter of principle, and then to accept one of those scholarships that are funded in that way?" She turns to me and says, "You are the ethicist, what do you think?" Well, I answered as best I could, sorting through the various issues that are there. There is a good topic you might explore. What are the implications? Is it a compromise to accept the scholarship money that is produced that way? She is

thinking about rules of right and wrong and how they would apply in this situation. There must be a rule, and we must be able to find out how it fits with this somewhat complex circumstance.

Now, ethical issues are legion and multiplying day and night. Hardly a month goes by without some scientific breakthrough that poses new questions of right and wrong. Meanwhile, the old questions persist. Is it ever right to lie? Is it ever right to break a promise? Is it ever right to get a divorce, have an abortion, refuse medical treatment, execute a criminal, or assassinate a ruler? The list is literally endless. And ethics does have a good deal to say about rules and how they apply to issues of right and wrong. With stem cell research now, scientists have been able to isolate stem cells from a human embryo and keep them alive in a Petri dish. They have been labeled the ultimate spare part, because by the proper manipulation, those can become any organ in the body. With so much good that can be done from those stem cells, is it right to use them? After all, stem cells do not just appear. They are isolated from an embryo—an organism that has to die. You have to kill an embryo in order to keep isolated stem cells alive. Is it right? What do we think about this?

Ethics is not just about issues of right and wrong; it is also about the kind of persons we ought to be. We ought to be the kind of persons who, for one, think issues of right and wrong really matter, who love the right and hate the wrong, and who can be counted on to do the right thing under pressure. Now, that is the character issue: whether we are committed to the right to such an extent that we think the right exists and we want to do it. The kind of persons that we are has very much to do with ethics. Ethics is about the content of our character as well as the rules of right and wrong. And when we talk about persons and character, we use the dichotomy of virtue and vice. That is standard terminology. Virtue is the branch of ethics that deals with moral agents and their motivations. Rules deal with actions and of course the attitude that lies behind those actions whereas virtue deals with persons in terms of these character issues and motivations.

Over the last 40 years, there has been enormous interest in virtue ethics in the field of philosophy and a growing interest in theology with respect to virtue ethics. In philosophy the reason the interest has developed is because of the dissatisfaction with the impasse that has been reached between content ethics and utilitarian ethics. I will come to those later in the course, but philosophical ethics has just reached an impasse. And so from that impasse about the rules, where so much ink has been spilt in order to figure it out, they turn away from rules and toward persons. Actually, you need both. You need rules, but you need also to examine motivations and qualities of persons. But virtue ethics has come into the popular culture. The phenomenal success of Bill Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* signaled a felt need to talk about something to do with values. "Values" is much too vague a term, in general. It has an original place in philosophy, but it became more subjective—"whatever I value is value"—and it lost its objective place in terms of what it originally had in mind. And with talk about values, public discourse has long since reached the saturation point. So it is good to talk about virtues, but I have something of a problem with *The Book of Virtues* as a way of learning virtues. I do not mean to critique that book. It is for developing virtue in children, but the kind of persons we ought to be is really linked to some unifying vision of the way things ought to be. Bennett takes stories from this, that, and the other place, and they are all about virtue in some sense, but there is no overarching narrative or vision in which they find their real coherence.

I think that what we need to talk about in ethics, what ethics does talk about in addition to rules and persons, are goals. In terms of good and evil, what is the goal of the human life? What is the good that we should seek in everything and the evil we should avoid? That reacts upon both the kind of persons we become and the kind of rules we seek to follow, but the goal is the overall perspective that we should ask. In addition to the content of our character, we need to talk about the chief end of man, to borrow a

phrase. Where are we headed with respect to this thing? In other words, all three of these questions belong together, and all three are dependent, ultimately, on some world and life view for their significance and really their understanding. Now, a world and life view has to deal with three basic issues. The first is the origin of man in the universe. Where do we come from? How did we get here? We cannot know what we are unless we deal with the issues of origin. It also has to deal with the present human condition, the dilemmas that we face, and whether we feel that the problem is oppression or that it comes from inside ourselves. Is the fault in our stars or is it in ourselves? That is a key question there. And third, a worldview needs to propose some way to the fulfillment of human nature. That is what a worldview does, basically. It addresses those three kinds of questions. When you study worldviews, you study in terms of what each says about the origin, universe, and man; its analysis or diagnosis of the human condition, what the problem is; and the proposal that it has for an answer. You recognize in that three-fold theme that the biblical perspective on it is creation, the Fall, and redemption, the redemption which brings everything to its consummation in terms of God's will. This three-fold rubric will affect our thinking in ethics all along the line. In this course we want to develop these three things. It affects everything in terms of the ethical display that we make.

Now, I use the biblical term *shalom* for the goals, or the overarching goal, that affects our ethics. "The Hebrew word *shalom* is biblical shorthand for universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight that is God's design for the creation." Cornelius Plantinga says this in his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, a book that you will probably want to read at some point. And I think that he is right on. It is a treatise on sin, but of course he does explore the way things ought to be as well as the way, in fact, they are. The goal in the broadest sense—the will of God, His *shalom* for His creation—defines for us the good. It is the will of God that defines for us the good. That goes back all the way to the beginning where Satan's challenge to God, in terms of the effects of the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is made the issue and the focus point of the probation test. Will we identify with what God says is good? Will we identify with His kingdom of righteousness, or will we side with the dominion of darkness? You have that dichotomy of the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness all the way through.

I will quote Plantinga once more. He says, "To be a responsible person is to find one's role in the building of *shalom*, the rewebbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment, and delight." That is a comprehensive definition. We need that. We need that in ethics. We need that goal as the perspective and the vision in which the persons we are aiming at becoming and the kind of rules that we follow make sense. "A responsible person finds one's role in the building of *shalom*." That is "the rewebbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment, and delight." This three-fold perspective is widely recognized. I want you to know that. I am not just making this up.

C. S. Lewis's little book, *Mere Christianity*, started out as a series of broadcast talks during World War II. It has become a bestseller and is still in print. It is a marvelous treatise. The section on Christian behavior begins with a discussion of the three parts of morality. The three parts of morality, he says, are fair play between persons, harmony within a person, and the purpose of life as a whole. Well, that is rules, virtue, and goals or rules, persons, and goals. He gives the illustration of a convoy of ships. Remember he did these broadcasts during wartime, so this example was appropriate. For a convoy of ships to fulfill its purpose, it must have 12 rules to keep the ships from bumping into one another. There are certain nautical rules that you have to keep a certain distance in following, and so forth. Then, there are certain observances for staying afloat. You have got to take care of your own ship and not just keep out of the way of others. You have got to take care of your own ship to stay afloat and arrive in good condition. And then you need directions for arriving at your destination. The mission is not a success if you end up in New York if you are supposed to head for Calcutta, and this is a rather obvious truth.

That is the three-fold core that is interwoven into ethics and that we need to see in terms of our Christian ethics. If we rephrase these in terms of the question of ethics, I would do it this way: what goals should we pursue in life? What goals are really worthy of human pursuit? Notice I said “human pursuit” because the Christian ethic is the ethic. We are followers of the One who said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” And although others are in partial knowledge of what the rules are and what kinds of persons we ought to be, it is only in the biblical ethic that you get the full world and life view that gives the basis to all of that. So, what goals are we to pursue in life?

Second, what sort of persons ought we to be? When we look at this in the biblical frame, we will see that in terms of vice, it is the works of the flesh; in terms of virtue, it is the fruit of the Spirit. There is a distinctly biblical perspective on all of these things. But formally, these three are all involved.

And third, what rules ought we to follow? Or as I sometimes put it, what standards ought we to practice? But I think it is simpler and clearer just to talk about what rules ought we to follow. Let us understand rules in a broader sense and not as, for example, just a narrow rule to drive on the left or right side of the road.

Now, in answering these three questions, we need to remember, as Jonathan Edwards said, “Moral matters are ultimately subject to divine assessment,” or what they are worth in the sight of God. We want to know what goals we ought to pursue as the will of God, what kind of persons we ought to be according to the will of God, and what rules we ought to follow that are the will of God. So I think the question of ethics really comes down to one question: what is God calling us to be and to do? I think it can be encapsulated in that single question. For the purposes of exposition, we really do need the three-fold exposition, but it comes down to this one question. When we say “God,” we mean of course the triune God, who has revealed Himself in Christ and the holy Scriptures. When we say “calling,” we mean summoning, His authoritative call, but also enabling, because God’s call is effective. God does not call us to do anything He does not give us His Holy Spirit to enable us to do. So what is the triune God, who has revealed Himself in Christ in the Holy Scriptures, summoning and enabling us, His redeemed people individually and corporately, to be and to do? Sometimes students have rephrased this question to say, “What is God calling me to be and to do?” and there is partial credit for that. But really, we want to understand what He is calling His redeemed people to do. We are members of a body, and our sanctification is progressing in connection with the body. “To be,” of course, is what we become as persons. And “to do” has to do with the activity that we implement in life. So “to be” and “to do” get at the whole problem. And I think that that one phrase, if we unpack it, contains in summary form our whole ethic.

And I have just one more of these three-fold summaries for you. When we are thinking about what goals we ought to pursue, we think that the controlling purpose of our lives is, in biblical terms, the glory of God. We think about what persons we ought to be, and we can think about what impels us to become the kind of persons God is calling us to be. The impelling motive of the Christian life is the love of God. That is intentionally ambiguous. Does that mean God’s love for us or our love for God? Well, I mean both, because the impelling motive of the Christian life or the covenant way of life is that God has loved us. And we loved Him in return, and our love of neighbor flows from that relationship. So the impelling motive of the Christian way of life, or the covenant way of life, is love of God. And then the directing principle by which we live is the law of God, God’s instruction, God’s Torah, God’s directions for living. And those we will be expounding. But we need all three of these together.

Let me illustrate in a couple of ways why they all belong together. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, “If I bestow my goods to feed the poor and have not love, it profits me nothing.” It is useless. Now, to bestow

one's good to feed the poor is a worthy goal. But if it is pursued for selfish reasons, in terms of how it looks to God who judges the heart, it looks very different. So, we need the three things together. Or you could take an issue such as procreation. Procreation is certainly a good that is worthy of pursuit. In fact, God says in the creation mandate, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." But what is your motivation in bringing children into the world? It is a serious question. Are you bringing children into the world for the glory of God, or are you bringing children into the world because of the satisfaction it gives you to have children? If that is the overriding motive, then what happens if the child is born with some physical handicap? What is your motive in bringing children into the world? Are there rules to follow in bringing children into the world? Well, the first rule is that couples bringing children into the world should be married, heterosexual couples. That is God's rule for bringing children into the world, and we welcome children who are brought into the world some other way, but they are at a disadvantage in the way they have been brought into the world. And you can go on with the questions in terms of the use of reproductive technologies. The fact that the goal, bringing children into the world, is worthy and that your motivation is for the glory of God does not settle all issues. You have to think through whether there are any limits in terms of the way we may manipulate the process of conception in order to bring children into the world.

Let us look at Romans 12:1-2. These are familiar verses to us, and yet they are so profound in terms of what they present before us for our developing a Christian ethic. Romans 12:1 says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy,"—or in the King James version, "by the mercies of God,"—"that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service." There are three things about human nature that are indicated in Romans 12:1. First of all, human nature is affectional. Notice that Paul makes his appeal to the mercies of God. "I urge you by the mercies of God," tender mercies of God. Now, to get the proper response, Paul seeks to invoke the motivation of gratitude. What are the mercies that he is talking about? Well, back in chapter 5 Paul says that "While we were helpless and hostile sinners, Christ died for us." We could not save ourselves. Not only that, but we did not want to be saved. We were God's enemies. Christ died for us. This is characteristic of Paul, as he begins by addressing the affectional level.

"...By the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice." There is the volitional element. That is a matter of conscious choice. There is a sense in which God has created us to be self-determining beings. That is different from being autonomous, self-governing beings. He retains His sovereignty over us, but He calls us to choose the good. I once heard Frances Schaeffer say that there are three great mysteries in the Christian faith: the mystery of how God can be one in three, the mystery of how Christ can be God and man, and the mystery of how God, without any abridgement of His sovereignty, can create beings whose choices have true moral significance. And we may not be able to put that together in a totally satisfying way, but we must adhere to both aspects of the mystery, just as we adhere to God as one in three and Christ as God and man without being able to explain all difficulties that those issues involve. And this is the volitional element that Paul addresses.

It is a conscious presentation of ourselves to God which Paul says "is our reasonable service." Human beings are rational, and ethics is not a matter of unthinking, of offering of ourselves to God. It requires deliberation as well as choice. It requires discernment, thinking through issues and how the rules apply in any given case. The NIV translates this word "spiritual service." I think that is a mistake. Paul uses a different word for spiritual. *Neumaticos* is the Greek word he uses for "spiritual." This is *logikos*, and you can see the root of logic in there. It has to do with the mind. So our ethics must take account of these three components, if we can use that term, of human nature: that we are affectional, volitional, and rational beings.

Then Paul goes on in Romans 12:2 to say three important things about the will of God. “Do not conform any longer with the pattern of this world,”—which is the way we have been living, Paul says, until we become united to Christ—“but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, then you will be able to test and approve,”—that is, to identify and put into practice—“God’s will.” And God’s will is described with three words. First, it is “the good.” That is the distinctive thing about biblical Christian ethics. The only authentic understanding of ethics is that we identify the “good” with the will of God. Everything, every aspect of the good, has to be identified with the will of God—what He sets forth as receiving His approval. The prophet Amos long ago called for adherence to what in philosophy is referred to as the first principle of practical reason. “Seek good, not evil.” “Hate evil, love good.” That is Amos 5:14-15. And “good” is the most comprehensive term for what human beings ought to be and to do. So we identify the will of God with good. That is Micah 6:8, which says, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” That is the good; that is the goal that we seek in everything that we do.

The will of God is further described as the acceptable, or, what is probably a better translation, the pleasing. That is, what is pleasing to God. What Paul adds to the thought that the will of God defines for us the good is that whether it is pleasing to God or not is a more personal aspect of that same thought. It is God’s approval that counts in ethics, not man’s approval or our approval. It is God’s approval, and it is the personal relationship that is brought out in the description of the will of God as the “pleasing.” It is what receives His blessing and approval that we seek in what we do in following His will. It makes the lawgiver, rather than the law, supreme. We are not following rules for the sake of rules; rather, we are following rules for the sake of being well-pleasing to God.

There is an additional motivating factor there, and it is finally described as the “perfect.” I think that our understanding of that should be that it is perfective of human nature. That is, if we follow the will of God we will find that fulfillment and satisfaction that is lacking in every other system of ethics because they fall short of the glory of God. It is the will of God that is our most basic definition of the good. The good is what is pleasing to God and perfecting of human nature, so that true fulfillment of human nature consists in being conformed to the will of God, which is essentially God’s own moral perfection being transcribed for creaturely imitation. Matthew 5:48 says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Sometimes we shy away from that. I had a student in Latvia tell me that he was very much helped in his personal life when someone told him that that word meant “mature” or being mature, so you could take account of the growing process. Well, I think we must take account of the growing process. I think God does deal with us as His children, and He knows that we grow from stage to stage. We are growing toward the image of Christ, but it does not make much sense to say, “Be ye therefore mature as your Father in heaven is mature.” It is talking about a standard that is here, and we really do not want a mediocre standard. We are not detracted so much by “Be ye slightly improved,” you know. The goal is perfection. There is something about perfection that draws us out and onward and something that is admirable about it, even if we do not attain it. It is something that is there for us to recognize and adhere to. And God’s standard as the perfect rule of God is that which alone will fulfill human nature, even though it is only entirely true in glory. Nevertheless, it is the standard toward which we aim.

I play the tuba. This is one of my lesser-known gifts, indeed one of my lesser gifts. But I find great fulfillment in playing the tuba. Some years ago, I went down to the Merry Tuba Christmas event, which is when all the low brass instruments—euphoniums and under—go and play Christmas music for the folks who are walking the malls. Well, we attracted attention. It is hard to ignore a herd of elephants. And after each carol, there would be polite applause, and we accepted that. And then we had an intermission, and four tuba players from the St. Louis Symphony and other symphonies gave a mini-concert. And it was marvelous! I mean, the tuba is an instrument that when it is played well with

excellence has a considerable range and color to it. And after their pieces, people stomped and applauded. And who applauded most? Well, it was us. It was the band. It was those of us who recognized how difficult it was, how wonderful it was, and how inspiring it was to see that kind of excellence. Well, that is why you should not shy away from the perfection of the will of God. It is the perfection of Christ. How can we accept a lesser standard than Christ? Of course, we know we fall short of the glory of God. We fall short of the image of Christ, but that is the goal toward which we are headed. And that is God's purpose in us now, to work that which is well-pleasing in His sight.