

### **The Disposition of Grace, III**

I would like to begin class today by reading the *Daleth* section of Psalm 119, which is verses 25-32. Psalm 119 is best taken in these eight-verse segments. It is an acrostic psalm. Each of the verses of the eight-verse segment begin with the same letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and the idea of that is to show the completeness of the Word of God for all of our lives. So it was a creative way of dealing with the writing of Scripture. So I would like to read the *Daleth* section for us as we begin this session. “I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word! I recounted my ways, and you answered me; teach me your decrees! Let me understand the teaching of your precepts, then I will meditate on your wonders. My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word! Keep me from deceitful ways. Be gracious to me through your law! I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes; O Lord, do not let me be put to shame. I run in the path of your command, for you have set me free!” It is marvelous, is it not? We do not usually use grace and law in the same breath, but the psalmist does. “Be gracious to me through your law.” It is God’s gracious will for our lives, and He provides the dynamic for its fulfillment. This segment is typical in praying to the Lord to teach His statutes, make me to know them, and make me to go in those ways. That last verse really brings home to us what we were talking about last time. “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free!” You know, Eric Liddell felt the pleasure of God in his running and in the kind of races that he did. Well, it is our great joy to know that God’s pleasure is on us as we run in His commands, because He has set our heart free.

Let us pray together.

*Lord, we are not worthy of the least of Your mercies and all of the truth that You have revealed to us, but we praise You for Your grace, Your grace that has set us free. And now we ask that You will teach us Your statutes that we may live in Your grace, that we may do your good pleasure, and that we may be Your servants in the situations to which You call us. These things we ask for Jesus’ sake. Amen.*

In the last session we were talking about the disposition of grace, and we had looked at the three characteristics that the Holy Spirit brings about in regeneration: faith, hope, and love. That is coordinated with the theme of Christian liberty, freedom to yield obedience to God not out of a slavish fear, but out of a childlike love and a ready mind. Love, then, is the summary of the *habitus* that the Spirit implants and the summary of the disposition that we have. It proceeds from faith. Faith works itself out with love, and the love is threefold: love for God, which as we saw last time is both the love of delight in the Lord as our goal and also the disposition to serve Him and to do what He delights in. We started briefly last time on the issue of neighbor love, and Romans 13 is one of those key texts where neighbor love is the summary of the Law and the fulfillment of the Law. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” Paul says, is a summary command. Everything is summed up in that command, and although it is very general as a precept, it is still very useful to have that summary command. It is also the fulfillment of the Law; that is, it provides the motivation for the fulfillment of all the specific commandments. So “love your neighbor as yourself” is both the summary of the Law and the general principle that love is the fulfillment of the Law.

I want to expand just a little bit on neighbor love and offer this definition of neighbor love. Take this in and react to it. You can improve on it, I am sure, but this is the way I think we should understand neighbor love. Neighbor love is the disposition to seek the good of another person created in the image of God. It is important that we include “created in the image of God” because the kind of love we are talking about is the kind of love that recognizes the value of beings for what they are as created in the

image of God. So, neighbor love is a disposition to seek the good of another person created in the image of God as a family member, a member of the body of Christ, or a member of the human community. We need also those component parts, because persons stand in to us in various relationships. And it begins with the closest and most innocent, the family circle. There is a sense in which charity does begin at home. That is, we learn what love is in seeking the good of another person within the family unit as we treat others in the family as God wants us to be treated. The next most intimate circle is as fellow members of the body of Christ. There are special responsibilities and special affections that are developed within the body of Christ, but then there is finally the relationship that we sustain to all as members of the human community. And that depends on circumstances as to how we go about ministering, serving, loving, and seeking the good of others. But those are the three relationships in which God has placed us and in which love is expressed. Basically the disposition of neighbor love is to seek the good of another person created in the image of God as that person is related to us in the family, in the church, or in the wider human community.

As we saw last time in looking at Leviticus 19, I think that the biblical ethic, not just the New Testament but also the Old, is a dispositional ethic. It begins with the heart: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” So I think that it is right to say that love for our neighbor, like love for God, is rightly understood as a dispositional complex. It is rational in that it recognizes other human beings as the image of God, it is affectional in that it relates to other human beings at the level of emotion, and it is volitional in that it seeks to do them good. So love for our neighbor is beneficent affection that is based on a proper understanding of who human beings are. It is beneficent affection for persons like ourselves. Love acts for the good of other persons out of an affection for them. It is not the same degree of intimacy within the family as in the church and in the wider human community, but even our enemies are not to be dismissed as human beings. Rather, the challenge is to do them good because they are created in the image of God. So even at that level, there is a recognition of their value.

It is the disposition that affects our perception of what other human beings really need. We cannot expect the same degree of spontaneous affection for every person that we have for people for whom we have a natural affinity. Love—*agape* or *agapao* is the verb—is a decision, but it is a decision not just about actions. It is a decision about the object of one’s affections. We are responsible for our hearts as well as for the outward actions. It is not enough to say love is a decision and that as long as I do somebody good I have fulfilled the Law. No, you cannot remove the emotional element from love, so I say, and you can test it out, that neighbor love is first of all a disposition. And really our hearts have to be changed, just as with respect to love with God. We have to have that disposition implanted in us, so neighbor love is first of all a disposition to seek the good of another person. It is more than a decision to do the right thing; it is a rational and volitional effect.

I would like to cite John Murray’s *Principles of Conduct* at this point. I think that Murray really got this right. In the background of what Murray says is the view of Emmanuel Kant, which has had a tremendous influence on ethics. Murray does not mention Kant, but Kant wrote, “Love out of inclination cannot be commanded, but kindness done from duty, although no inclination impels us, is practical, residing in the will and not of melting compassion.” Now, that is Kant and it is very widespread, even among people who do not know the source is in Kant. Love out of inclination cannot be commanded. What can be commanded is kindness done out of duty. There are several problems with that when you begin to look at the biblical data. First Corinthians 13, for example, says, “If I sell all my goods to feed the poor and have not love”—that is, if I do not have the disposition that moves me to that out of affection for God and for my neighbor—in terms of God’s judgment on it, it does not receive His approval. It is worthless. It is good in and of itself. It helps somebody, but it is not the biblical ethic.

Bear that in mind when Murray writes, “We must resist that perverse conception of the nature of love that we cannot be commanded to love, that love must be spontaneous and cannot be evoked by demand.” What does he say? Well, love is both emotive and motive. This is John Murray. “Love is feeling and it impels to action. And since the love is in the category of feeling which creates affinity with the object, the fulfillment which loves constrains is not the fulfillment of coerced and unwilling formal compliance, but the fulfillment of cheerful and willing obedience. It is impossible for the prescriptions of law to have scope in our relationships to our fellow man unless love reigns supreme. Love is both expulsive and impulsive affection.” I think it is necessary to meditate on that. You can look up this quote if you want to pursue it, but the idea is that love is feeling and it impels to action.

This does not mean that we are always on the verge of tears. Emotions in that sense are not in view in terms of what is being commanded, but the subtle disposition, or the affectional attitude, of our heart to become a compassionate person is the biblical ethic. And God has given us the means by which that dynamic is developed in us by the way in which the Holy Spirit works in us faith, hope, and love. We ought not to think of love as just a decision to do a right action. I often get the expression “I love you, but I do not like you.” I think that creates a false dichotomy. And we know what it means, that there are some people for whom you have a natural affinity because of various interests and so forth, and our love should not be limited to those whom we like. That does not mean that we are not responsible for developing the affective side of our neighbor love, because it is that which really does impel us to action. It enables us to really understand what other people need in terms of the good we seek to do for them, and to do it in terms of the steady practice of love.

One of the most effective testimonies in the New Testament is the character reference of Dorcas, who was raised from the dead in the book of Acts. Before that mighty event, folks were bringing to the apostles things she had done with her own hands for the poor, and the verse read, “She was always doing good and helping the poor.” That was her testimony. That is her character reference. Now, we might do good once in a while and help the poor sporadically, but Dorcas is an exhibit of the affection that leads to continuous action on behalf of others. So I think that Murray is right. Do not get caught in the idea that love cannot be commanded as though emotions cannot be commanded. We think we are to cry on cue and that we are always on the verge of tears. That is not the kind of emotion that we are talking about, but we are talking about the affective side of our being, which identifies with persons in their needs, and not just their needs abstractly.

One reason I emphasize this point is because of the sharp distinctions that have been made between sacrificial love and mutual love in the discussions of *agape*, and I think that it is false. There is Nygren’s book on *Agape and Eros*, which leaves you with the lie that *agape* is spontaneous love for the unworthy. Well, that is really not the biblical idea of love. The best article that I have seen on love is by Ernest DeWitt Burton. It is an appendix to his commentary on Galatians from the International Critical Commentary Series. He has an excursus on *agape* and *agapao*. He looks at how these verbs and nouns were used in classical Greek, in the Septuagint, and in the New Testament. And he gives a better analysis than Nygren, which is written at about the same time, in terms of the flexibility of *agapao*, the verb that is used for “to love” in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and the corresponding noun that derives from that. It is basically parallel to the English word “love.” Sometimes it is lamented that the English word “love” is deficient, but when you really look at *agapao* in Greek, it is basically the same as the English word “love.” It has that same kind of flexibility.

There are three elements, he says, that are in love. The first element involves recognizing the value of something so that there is an element of admiration about it. Then there is the element of desire for something that is valuable. With persons, that would be a desire for a relationship. And third and most

distinctive as it is used in the Scriptures, is the element that includes the wish to benefit. That is what we focus on in *agapao* because that was in the background in the classical usage. But when that element receives more prominence in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the other elements do not disappear. Therefore love, *agape*, is more volitional than the other terms for love that are used in Greek, but not with the absence of this recognition of value, the desire for relationship, as well as the wish to do someone good. Here is the bottom line for Burton after this excursus. He says, "It is this type of love in which recognition of worth is the foundation and the desire to benefit the leading element that Paul exalts in 1 Corinthians 13 and of which he says in Romans 15 that it is the fulfillment of the Law." I would probably want to substitute "recognition of value is the foundation and the desire to benefit is the leading element." It is those two components together that bring together the affective and the volitional, and really the rational. Because the rationale given in Scriptures for our love, even of enemies, is that they are made in the image of God. And we are inviting them to cease their hostility and become reconciled to God.

I think we could put the three elements in summary form in this way: to admire, to desire, and to benefit. When it comes to the Lord, admiration turns to adoration. But that is also recognizing the worth even of our enemies. We confuse being worthy and being deserving. I think that is why I would rather seek to recognize the intrinsic value of human persons even when they are opposed to us in the family, in the church, or in the wider community. We still should have an affective element in our approach to them and a desire for the relationship to be what it ought to be. Now, remember, it is not all the same degree of intimacy. We do not level everything out. *Agape* does not level out all distinctions, but it enhances all relationships in terms of this volitional and affectional element. It is basically, as I have defined it, to do someone good, or to seek the good of another. That is how the disposition issues in action, but we ought not to identify love just with the action and not see it also as the disposition that lies behind it. This means, since we are responsible for who we are, we need to attend to the development of our disposition, our attitude for other people. That is why you have Paul spending so much time rehearsing what God has done for us, so that we become forgiving persons as God has forgiven us. There is the disposition to forgive, a disposition to be patient with others, and so on through the list of the fruit of the Spirit or the characteristics of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

Love can be commanded. Love as disposition and love as inclination can be and is commanded. That is the biblical ethic. You know, it sounds right at first that you cannot command emotion, and we take that to mean you cannot just tell somebody to cry on cue. That is true, but emotion is a fluctuating psychological state of being. Affection is a subtle attitude of mind and heart toward others that reaches out to them. It is based on the creation and the image of God. We take the same attitude toward them that God takes toward them.

Now, a related question is the question of self-love. How does this fit with the biblical ethic? If the two great commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself, it seems like self-love is not really in there anyway. It seems that this does not need that much attention, is something we naturally do or even sinfully are engaged in, and is not appropriate to an authentic Christian ethic. In looking at "Love your neighbor as yourself" in regard to self-love, there are three ways in which this has been construed. And you can find good theologians taking each of these positions. One position is that the meaning of the commandment is love your neighbor as you now sinfully love yourself. Calvin takes that position. Calvin says that our self-absorption as sinners, the degree of attention that we lavish on ourselves, is now made the pattern on which we approach others. And so, as I say, you can cite good theological support for all three of the positions I am representing. A student once asked me, "How do you know when to cite Calvin?" My answer was, "When he agrees with you, of course." But to be fair, sometimes even Homer nodded

occasionally. I think that Calvin had a preacher's interest here because he saw so much attention being given to self-love in the scholastics. In Aquinas, too much was being made of love for self, and I think that that explains Calvin's response. But really it cannot be that we should make as the model of how we love others our self-absorption, the worship of self. It does not compute. That does not really fit with Leviticus 19 or any of the places where it goes. If you take a sinful attitude, self-absorption, or concern for self to the exclusion of God and everybody else, how can that be made the pattern for loving others?

There must be another way. Love your neighbor as you just naturally love yourself. Now that seems more plausible. That is John Stott's position, and he articulates it very well. He is another master. He is a masterful exegete, but this does not seem quite right to me either. It seems to me that there is an equivocation here, because it is saying love your neighbor morally as you just naturally love yourself. Those are two different kinds of love. The idea here is we just have a spontaneous natural desire for our lives and to keep ourselves going, and that spontaneous natural affection that we have for ourselves is now to be transferred to our neighbor. Well, I think that is an equivocation. It is the use of two terms.

So I think there is a third way. Love your neighbor as you rightly love yourself. That is, you are created in the image of God and there are certain principles to take care of yourself, because you belong to God. As you rightly love yourself those principles should be applied to others. I think that, in reading this in light of the first commandment, there are self-regarding obligations that stem from the fact that we belong to God. Not to trivialize it, but He says to us, take good care of yourself, you belong to Me. "The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit," and therefore there are certain principles about which you are to take care. We do not usually have a problem with this. It is only in highlighting it in this way.

But take the question of suicide. Where is that forbidden in the Ten Commandments? Where in The Ten Commandments is suicide forbidden? Well, some folks say it is not and that "you shall not murder" refers to your actions toward other people. That is not the way that we have taken that. Suicide is basically self-murder. The real problem with it is taking a human life that belongs to God. And, there is a rightful love for ourselves. It is something that just does not naturally happen; it is something that we choose and we choose in relation to God. And you can go through our Shorter Catechism in which it understands all of those commandments to mean that we should be concerned about our own and our neighbor's property, our own and our neighbor's life, our own and our neighbor's chastity, etc. There are self-regarding principles that stem from the fact that we belong to God. And we should extend those principles to those who God has created in His image.

These are the three traditional ways of construing "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." I think there might be a better fourth way of doing this, and that is to love your neighbor as a person like yourself. I think if we would not try to get this into a command to love yourself, but recognize that the force of the commandment is to recognize the personhood of others and that the same legitimate concerns that we have for ourselves are now to be extended to other persons in the image of God, it would, I think, resolve that problem. And I would point out that it is true that, strictly speaking, love requires another for its object. He who loves the other has fulfilled the Law. So I think that those people are right who say that you never have self-love as a command. You do have the Proverb "He who gets wisdom loves his own soul." In the Septuagint, that is "loves himself," and it is *agapao*. So, self-love is not wrong, but it is not the clearest way of expressing ourselves. I think there are better ways of putting it because it is liable to be confused with a sinful self-love or autophilia, love of one's self, which is specifically condemned in the Scriptures. But in that context in 1 Timothy, self-love is substituting oneself for God. Egotry is really the self-love that is being condemned there. The Bible does not condemn what I call a theocentric self-regard. All of the compounds of self—self-esteem, self-assertion, self-worth—are true or false, depending on how they are attended and basically whether or not they take

God into account. For example, self-assertion can be inappropriately setting oneself forward, or it can be standing up for one's God-given rights, depending on the circumstances. The pattern is getting us to think of other people in light of what we rightly think about ourselves. How we are to rightly love ourselves is a matter of looking at the Scriptures and seeing what the Scriptures have to say about ourselves.

This leads into the fourth major topic, which I am going to call "The Direction of Grace." It overlaps with the chapter in the book that I call "The Direction of the Christian Life." When we talk about the disposition of grace, the *habitus* that God implants, this is not just an arbitrary change. That is a better way of understanding and getting at the kind of person we ought to be, and I think that the parallel to that is the direction that God gives us in His grace. I had that in the Dalith section of Psalm 119 earlier this session. We gave for disposition a theological term, *habitus*. For direction, we should use the Hebrew word *torah*. Now, let me get a running start at this. I tried to say that love for God includes the disposition to walk in His way. In addition to delighting in Him, it is the disposition to walk in His ways. To walk in His ways is not just the ways that He has prescribed; it is the way He has gone before. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament you have the paths that God has laid out for us, or the paths that He has trod before, so that God's redemption of Israel from Egypt becomes then that pattern of their conduct. And preeminently with the example of Christ in the New Testament, He has given us the same example to follow. But love for God includes the disposition to walk in His ways and to follow Him out of reverence for who He is and gratitude for what He has done. If you can put it in a phrase, I would call it obedient love. That is, love that submits itself to the will of God. And true human fulfillment lies in the path of obedience—that is, in submissiveness to the will of God. Sometimes people react to the idea of obedience as being a narrow concept that cannot be from Scripture. The incarnate Son of God Himself during His days on earth exhibited the reverent submission by which human nature is affected. That is Hebrews 5:8-9. So obedience is a key category, but it should be used as an adjective—obedient love—because love is the primary response that God desires. But the divinely appointed way to good works is of course through the gracious gift of faith that God gives us in salvation.

Ephesians 2:8-10 is the key text. "By grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." "That not of yourselves" refers to the whole phrase "by grace you are saved through faith." It includes faith, but it is not restricted to it. "It is the gift of God." This whole process of salvation by grace through faith is the gift of God. It is "not of works lest any man should boast"; you cannot earn that. We are totally dependent on God's initiative. Not just His initiative, but we are dependent on His power to change us. Grace is effective in bringing about this change from the unbelieving to becoming believers. Of course, we have believed, but we believed because we are impelled to that by the work of the Holy Spirit. Then verse 10 goes on to say, "For we are his workmanship [craftsmanship], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has foreordained that we should join in them." So good works are part of the process; they are part of the salvation. They flow from salvation by grace through faith. But understanding the proper order, good works are part of God's plan for us. They cannot be ignored, because God has purposed that we live in them, and the handiwork of God's new creation in Christ is exhibited in discipleship. Before faith came, before we came to faith in Christ, our attitude was autonomy: "Nobody tells me what to do." Now since God has redeemed me and brought me from death to life, the proper attitude is "show me what you want me to do." And God gives direction for the good works He has prepared in advance for believers to do.

So, the directing principle of the Christian life is the will of God as revealed in Christ and the Holy Scriptures and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. We can break that down into its component parts. The direction of grace is, first of all, to do with the Word of God. As Sanderson remarks, "This is the

primary means of grace by which God directs our lives. It is through His Word.” The second question of *The Shorter Catechism* says, “What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify Him and enjoy Him?” The answer is “The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.” All Scripture is torah in the sense that it is the revealed instruction of God for how we should live in His covenant. All Scripture is torah in the sense that it is God’s authoritative direction in the way of life, and you can see its parts in 2 Timothy 3:14-17. Paul writes that Timothy from infancy has known the Holy Scriptures “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, so that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished to every good work.” All Scripture has that function.

When it comes to specific actions, I think that we should remember that Scripture as torah, as God’s instruction in the way of life, is not limited to commandments or rules. It is all Scripture that is inspired and profitable, so the narratives of Scripture, the poetry of Scripture, as well as the parts that we think of in terms of law, are all there for our direction. And it meets us holistically in terms of what we are as human beings. So if it were just a book of rules, it would not be the kind of direction that God wants us to have. The rules occur in a broader context of all of those aspects of literary genre that you have in the Scriptures. They are all torah. We translate that word “law,” but in English the word “law” has the narrower connotation of a rule with a penalty. And that is a part of God’s torah, but it is His divinely revealed and authoritative instruction in the way of life. That is the sense in which we mean it here.

Now just to be clear, we are moving from the disposition, the character issues, and the virtues that are to be developed within us to particular actions. When it comes to particular actions, I think that it is useful to think about the various kinds of direction that you get when it comes to specific actions. First of all, there is the category of prohibition. The Ten Commandments are largely in this form: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal. I use Romans 13:10 as a peg for this category of Scriptural direction: “Do no harm.” It happens to be the first principle of medical ethics, but it is appropriate all along the line. That is what Paul mentions first of all as a characteristic of love. The disposition we have toward our neighbor is “love works no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” So the first category is in terms of prohibition. And I would say that the most definitive form of Scriptural direction is prohibition. Love may be more than not harming other people, but non-maleficence, as it is called, is a healthy part of love. By the way, Paul does that also in Galatians 5:15. After the great presentation of love as the fulfilling of the Law, he relates it to gossip. “If you go on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be consumed by one another.” So I would say that though the Christian calling is fundamentally positive, we should not minimize the role of prohibition.

The negative commandments provide direction by showing us what is always and everywhere incompatible with God’s kingdom and glory in the image of Christ. The negative commandments provide direction by showing us what is always and everywhere incompatible with the kingdom of God and the other aspects of the goal. They set the boundaries. They even take precedence over the positive commandments in this sense—that we are forbidden to do evil in order that good may come. So if God has absolutely prohibited something, then no motive or intention of doing good can justify doing something that God has prohibited. So the first thing to ask about any proposed action is whether it is prohibited in Scripture. Now, it is sometimes a matter of discernment to know precisely what God has prohibited. In other examples, it is clear-cut and it is only our unwillingness to submit to those prohibitions that leads us to manipulation and finding rules for getting around the rules. But you cannot take a verse out of context. You have to read prohibitions in light of the whole reading of Scripture. We will come to that in detail when we get to the resolution of moral dilemmas.

But the first category is prohibition, the negative commandments that set the boundaries, and they are the more definitive of the commandments. Even in the cases of prohibition, it is sometimes perplexing to define them in an absolute way for which there are no conceivable exceptions, and we need to be very careful about that. But it is more likely that we can express absolutes in terms of what is prohibited universally than what is commanded.

For the second form of direction I am going to use the word “command.” I mean by that positive command. In the book I used “mandates,” but you will see why I am substituting “command” for that a little later on. But the peg here would be Galatians 6:10: the good to all. “More fully as you have opportunity, do good to all, especially those that are the household of faith.” The positive commandments require discernment in terms of what opportunities we have in order to carry them out. And they include commandments that are open-ended, such as the cultural mandate to subdue the earth for the glory of God. We might call it the dominion mandate, to exercise dominion over the earth for the glory of God. And it includes the Great Commission. There is the dominion mandate and the mandate to evangelize all nations. Together those encompass the great purposes God has for mankind. Obviously they cannot be carried out by an individual. They require corporate responsibility so that we are responding to what God is calling us, as His redeemed people individually and corporately, to do for His glory. The positive commandments, in contrast to the prohibitions that set limits, tend to be open-ended in their requirements. As in Galatians 6:10, doing good is only limited by opportunity, with the needs of fellow believers to be of paramount concern. So the positive demands of love require two things: discernment of what opportunities are ours by divine providence, and second, prudence in determining the means that are most likely to be effective in action.

I would like to give at this point an excursus on duty. I need to say something about duty in this respect. I think that the Christian ethic is certainly not just negative, although I would not minimize the importance of the prohibitions in establishing the boundaries. And as I have said, we are more likely to be able to define universal principles in terms of negative command. But we need the positive commands. And with the positive commands the reason that they are open-ended is that the Christian ethic calls forth not simply a standard of common decency, but rather one of moral excellence, or riskful, strenuous activity, as one author puts it.

Although we sometimes use the word duty for the whole open-ended positive demands of God on our lives, I think that duty, as a term, does not work well to cover the whole thing. I am relying here on an insight of Iris Murdoch, who besides being a novelist is also a significant British philosopher. Let me run this by you. “The demand that we should be virtuous or try to become good is something that goes beyond explicit calls of duty. One can, of course, extend the idea of duty into the area of generalized goodness by making it a duty always to have pure thoughts and good motives. I would rather keep the concept of duty nearer to its sense as something fairly strict, recognizable, intermittent so that we can say that there may be time off from the call of duty, but no time off from the demand of good. Duty, then, I take to be formal obligation relating to occasions where it can to some extent be clarified.” I think that that is right. I think that we tend to use the term duty for the whole thing, and you can make it that. As she points out, you can understand that it is our responsibility to always love God and our neighbor. But the actual biblical usage of the language of duty is something more restricted and precise. The noun “duty” occurs only three times in the New Testament: once in the sense of a debt in Matthew 18:32, once in the sense of something due such as taxes or respect in Romans 13:7, and once for the reciprocal obligation of husband and wife in bed in 1 Corinthians 7:3. Tyndale translated that as “due benevolence,” and that was later adopted by the King James Version. That may strike us as euphemistic, but actually it is appropriate for conjugal obligation, which is never a matter of simple justice, let alone some kind of debt that must be paid. Those are the only three references to duty in the New Testament.

There is a related verb which means “to be obliged,” but it most often refers to conduct that is open-ended, requiring that we become loving, serving persons in imitation of our Savior. So the will of God obliges us to aspire to more than what can be prescribed as a matter of strict duty. I will have to stop there for now, but I want us to understand the limitations of the word “duty” when it comes to Christian ethics. There is a place for it, and I think even with respect to duty that can be prescribed, there is a special way in which it is to be performed. But we will have to come to that in the next session.