

Foundations of Christian Ethics
April 20, 2017, The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

“Ethics” or “morality” is the study of making good decisions (and avoiding bad ones) in our behavior and intentions. “Christian Ethics” answers these questions through God’s eyes—seeking to know what God would have us do. In all of these conversations, remember that as Christians, we know that we as humans are fallible—**we mess up all the time. Yet God loves us anyway!** This gives us the freedom to examine our lives without fear, knowing that God is always ready to embrace us and help us make better choices in the future. Since the world around us often operates with very different priorities, it is important for us to learn how to make good decisions as Christians.

The study of Christian Ethics involves four topics:

- **God:** our understanding of who God is in relation to us and our choices;
- **Moral Formation:** the formation of our conscience and habits to recognize the good and exercise good judgment.
- **Good:** discerning the basic values: what is ‘the good’ to be desired, or ‘the evil’ to be avoided;
- **Moral Judgment:** the analysis and use of moral principles in given situations

God:

God comes first—not ethics!

How we act affects how we pray and love, and who we worship.

But God loves us first—God’s grace saves us, not our behavior.

The ultimate end of Christian Ethics is *God*, not “goodness.”

Notice that with God at the center, ethics are not based on “self-interest,” freedom, efficiency or social utility.

Moral Formation:

The human conscience is not automatically pure. We are not perfect and we get things wrong.

Our conscience must be formed to recognize the good and our wills formed to seek the good and avoid the evil. For Anglicans (Episcopalians among them), ethics is not so much a list of rules or a philosophy, but a matter of daily Christian living, formed in a community of word and sacrament, in the practices of prayer, reading scripture, and relationship with God together.

The Anglican saying of “**Scripture, Tradition and Reason**” helps us: Scripture is the basis of our understanding of God and the Christian life. Our reading of scripture is guided by the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the life of the church in history and today (tradition). We seek God with our God-given capacities of understanding, being guided by the Holy Spirit in our reasoning. Notice that scriptures comes first, then tradition, then reason.

“The Good:”

How do we determine what is good? There are three approaches, and each is important in the Christian life. Here is a summary:

- **Law:** righteousness is obedience (& sin is disobedience).
- **Purpose:** righteousness is living in accordance with God’s purposes (gives us principles)
- **Relationship:** righteousness is right relationship with God and others (and one’s self).

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of Law & Obedience:

The Summary of the Law (Matt 22:37-39: love of God & neighbor)

The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 or Deuteronomy 5:1-21)

Jesus’ New Commandment (John 13:34: love as Christ loved us)

Teachings of the church such as the “Seven Deadly Sins” and Seven Virtues.

What is important? God comes first above all else in our lives, and every human being has dignity and worth.

Knowledge of right & wrong does not come from our preferences or desires (we often get it wrong). Our conscience must be *formed* to avoid vice (habits of the heart that lead to sin) and promote virtue (good habits of the heart, and gifts from God (faith, hope and love)). We are also called to love sacrificially for others.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of the purposes of God:

We find principles for action based on God’s purposes for aspects of life, such as life itself, sex, marriage, government, etc. For example, Jesus grounds rules of marriage in the Genesis creation account, and he grounds rules against malice in the law against murder. This approach often understands most sin as “disordered loves:” where our natural and good desires go wrong, requiring us to re-form our conscience and will.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of relationship:

Rather than determining “guilt or innocence,” this approach describes our situation in terms of our closeness to God, acknowledging our mistakes and God’s forgiveness. This avoids legalism (where it’s all about rules and not about love). But we learn from laws and purposes about what is best for our relationships. All three approaches go together.

Moral Judgment: the analysis and use of moral principles in given situations.

Informed about good and evil and formed in relationship with God, we then live in a complex world involving difficult moral decisions. “The good” is often unclear or mixed with the evil or imperfect, and often, our alternatives and understanding is limited. How do we make good decisions? Often, our moral decisions are complicated by the systems of relationships and external factors involved. It is helpful, therefore, to determine to what extent we can effect an outcome (what can we do about it?), and to what extent we are responsible. These are questions of *agency*.

And we live together. We have responsibilities to our neighbors and ourselves. We may not be accountable for another’s actions, but we play a part in social systems that can do great harm (such as racism) or great good. How do we act to support the good in the system? Principles of justice (there are several) and respecting the dignity of the individual through autonomy play roles here as well. But they are complex and can sometime mask more selfish ends.

- **Agency and responsibility:** Our role and ability to effect outcomes in a given situation.
- **Do what is good/ avoid what is evil** (vs. doing nothing to do good or to avoid evil)
- **Justice:** treating equals equally; can be based on merit, need, effort, or common benefit
- **Autonomy:** respect for self-determination of others. Autonomy is not a good in itself, however, since human choices often are sinful. Coercion of others can violate dignity and trust, so limits to human freedom are carefully chosen, usually in terms of the common good, relying on principles of justice. Autonomy does not relieve us of our responsibility to encourage the good in others and decline to participate in the evil of others.

Pros & Cons of these three approaches to Christian Ethics:

In terms of “Law:”

Pro

Clarity & consistency
Many are easy to remember
Applies to everyone

Con

Can lead to legalism (trusting in the law, not God)
Sometimes hard to interpret or apply
False sense of righteousness
(rather than relying on God’s grace)

In terms of God’s purposes:

Pro

Expansive, leads to principles
Can apply to new situations
Brings nuance vs. legalism
(‘the spirit of the law’)

Con

Can get 2 or 3 layers removed from scripture
Can get backed into a logical corner
Can form a new kind of legalism

In terms of relationship—with God and with others *in Christ*:

Pro

Sets a high priority on grace, mercy
and forgiveness
more about the relationship,
less about legalism
more about what is *shared*
including accountability
no room for self-righteousness

Con

Could be used to dodge the law
Risks evaluating the relationship only on one’s
own subjective terms (bias...)
-or on the model of transactional mutual
self-interest vs. self giving
Risks forgetting about relationship with *God*
as the basis

Perhaps *Covenant* integrates Law, Purposes (“laws written on your heart”) & Relationship

Moral Formation (to form our consciences):

Knowing the law
Understanding God’s purposes
Engaging in relationship with God
Engaging in relationships with other people *in Christ*