

## INCREASING ETHICAL AWARENESS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Biblical morality continues to decline in the United States. Evolution and atheism have captured the minds of many. No longer is “right” right and “wrong” wrong. A nebulous haze of subjectivism pervades popular culture. It seems undeniable that Christians in today’s world live in a thoroughly secular society.

On the whole, people are insensitive to or unaware of their responsibilities and obligations as creatures who are made in the image of their God. True, many believe that God exists, but this God is sentimental, soft, and easily ignored. Any talk of God as holy, just, wrathful, angry, or jealous—all biblical concepts about the nature of God—is thought to be mean, oppressive, and cruel. “God is love, and love is anything,” is the axiom of the day. But when God is defined only as love, and love is considered to be the individual’s subjective response to a given situation, then God may be viewed as the approver of a host of conflicting solutions to ethical issues and problems. On this basis, a person could say, “God wants me to do the loving thing,” and everyone would be right. After all, “God is love, and love is anything.”

The above evaluation of God posits a less than adequate view about God. God is seen as love only or, at least, as more loving than anything else. But this is not true. There is more to the nature of God than just love, and love is not a superior attribute of God. God also is righteous, holy, true, and equally so. To a great extent, the moral crisis in the world today can be attributed to what might be called the “reduction” of God. David Field says, “God is the source of all goodness. The right action in any situation is the one which conforms to God’s will. Correct

behavior is God-centered behavior.”<sup>1</sup> But when God is reduced to a part of his total attributes (e.g., situationism) or to nothingness (e.g., atheism, naturalism), then the “goodness” based on a reduced God becomes reduced. And “reduced goodness” is not goodness at all; rather it is sin, “a missing of the mark.”

People have failed to know God as creator, and they have failed to know themselves as creatures. Therefore, people do not give honor and glory to God—praise that naturally should flow from those who are created to the creator. We are in an unnatural state. We are in sin. We have fallen short of the glory of God. Consequently, because of our misunderstanding of God, we do not know what is good and what is bad. We are unable to make sound ethical decisions.

This lack of proper knowledge of God opens the door to complete and total depravity.

Paul aptly explains this connection in Romans 1.28-31 (NIV).

Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Why has the ethos of humans become dark and gloomy? Why do people fail to find “the good way”? The answer lies in the realization that God’s creatures have rejected the truth about the nature of the one who created them.

Another indication of the connection between the lack of moral values and ignorance of God comes from the ten commandments of the Hebrew Bible. The ten commandments are laws of a general nature that “deal with man’s basic behavioral problems and form an objective guide

---

<sup>1</sup>David Field, *Free to Do Right* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 12.

for the conduct of a moral life.”<sup>2</sup> These laws are based on eternal and unchanging principles which are rooted and grounded in the nature of God. To compare, however, the conduct of humans with the stipulations of the Decalogue is to recognize a serious and distressing disconnect.

People serve many false gods (e.g., science, money, pleasure, and self). In this world of self gratification and materialistic satisfaction, people bow down to a variety of worthless idols that they themselves have fashioned. The name of the Lord God is blasphemed and not revered. Humans leave no time in their busy weekly schedules to pay homage to the Lord God. Children do not respect parents, and parents do not discipline their children. Murder, sexual immorality, theft, and lying are all around, and greed is a way of life. Why do we behave this way? Why do we reject and violate the immutable principles that are contained in the ten commandments? It is because we have abandoned the very foundation and source of all orderly existence—God himself. Consequently, we feel no obligation, or “right” and “wrong,” in how we relate to God and other people. And without God, we are amoral.

Because of the current decline in morality in the United States, ethical awareness (i.e., knowledge of the issues and problems and the right answers to those issues and problems) in the local church is necessary. If it is morally right to be able to discern good from evil, and if the Christian is to follow God who is perfect goodness, then the Christian must be able to tell the difference between good and evil.

---

<sup>2</sup>Rubel Shelly, *Young People Make Moral Decisions* (University, AL: Youth In Action, 1972), 2.

The Bible, which is the voice or word of God, gives several reasons (e.g., an apology) for studying ethical problems. First, the Christian must make important decisions about issues and questions of life. People on a daily basis make moral choices whether they are aware of that or not. And these decisions involve right and wrong, ought and ought not, obligation and duty versus freedom and liberty.<sup>3</sup> The Christian needs to know the will of God for the issues of life. The Christian has an obligation to “discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12.2; ESV).

Second, ethical awareness will help the Christian avoid errors of faulty ethical reasoning. For example, many ethicists argue for a sharp variance between “law” as a motive and “love” as a motive. But even love is a requirement of the law of God. Love is commanded by God. Love is a debt or an obligation, and it is the motivating force that honors and respects God’s rules and regulations. In Romans 13.8-10 (NRSV), Paul explains love as the completion or fulfilling of the law. He writes:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Thus, to sharply distinguish law and love in ethical issues may not be correct. A study of the various perspectives to ethical issues and problems will help the Christian avoid basic errors.

Third, ethical awareness will stimulate moral growth. The Christian is urged by the writer of Hebrews to “go on to maturity” (6.2; ESV). And the mature believer shows certain

---

<sup>3</sup>Examples from the Old Testament book of Genesis of persons who made very important moral decisions include Eve (3.1-7), Abraham (22.1-9), the sons of Jacob (37.26-33), and Joseph (39.6-12).

capabilities. He is able to digest the solid food of God's word. By his dedicated use of this wholesome nourishment, he has developed and strengthened the ability to distinguish good from evil. He is able to control the tongue, the most unruly part of the body. He is able to love even his enemies. And he recognizes the need to continue to grow and to strive toward maturity (Hebrews 5.13, 14; James 3.2; Matthew 5.43-48; Philippians 3.13-16). A sincere study of Christian ethics can support this process of sanctification.

Fourth, the nature of the Christian life compels the believer to make ethical decisions. Christianity touches every aspect of life (see Colossians 3.16ff.). If Christian living involves one's attitude and behavior in the home, at work, during recreation, and so forth, then every believer should be equipped and prepared to make right choices in each sphere of life. This calls for thorough ethical awareness.

The biblical imperative for ethical awareness is clear. The source for ethical education likewise is clear. The quest for the good begins and ends with God. God is the creator of people and the ruler of the universe. People in harmony with God are creatures of dignity who are endowed with the right to exercise dominion on earth. God has a goal or objective for people. The purpose for those created in the image of God is to fear, honor, and glorify God. The way to do this is to obey God and his commands. This is the teleological and deontological ethic for all people and especially for the people of God. And from close union with God, people can understand the three basic issues of life. We know our origin, purpose, and destiny. We know we came from God; we are here for God; and we will return to God. God reveals to us what is good, because we need to be shown what is good. Furthermore, for our benefit and salvation, God guides us along the way.

The above explanation of biblical ethics contrasts considerably with secular or humanistic ethics. The latter is the effort by humans to ascertain what is good apart from divine revelation (e.g., word from God or help from God). What separates the two approaches to ethics, at its most basic level, is sin.

The continuity between secular and biblical ethics is broken by the natural man's rebellion against God. Even when secular ethics presents theological ethics as the highest achievement of ethical thought, as now and then it does out of a sense of lostness in the wilderness of speculative morality, it obscures this basic fact of man's sinfulness. It misrepresents him as capable of reasoning his way back to God. Every speculative ethics presents, in its own peculiar way, an inadequate and distorted reflection of the Divine ethical claim.<sup>4</sup>

Sin has distorted the vision of humans. And without dealing with the basic problem of sin, the difference between good and bad will remain cloudy and unclear.

Thus, a special word from God is needed. First, it is required to tell humans how to be in harmony with God (i.e., to deal with sin which separates humans from God). Second, it is required to tell humans how to grow in the likeness and image of God (i.e., to imitate God in doing good). The Christian believes that this special word from God is found in the Bible. Adequate reasons support this belief that the Bible is the textbook for ethical awareness. And the Bible claims this for itself (see 2 Timothy 3.16-17).

The reasons and the sources for ethical awareness have been discussed briefly. The remaining question concerns how ethical awareness is to be taught. If people are amoral or immoral because they lack a true and proper knowledge of God, then the necessary beginning point for instruction would be the nature and character of God. Philosophical and rational approaches to ethical considerations must be scrutinized in light of biblical teaching concerning

---

<sup>4</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 146.

who God is. God's expectations of his creatures based on his holiness must be defined in ways that can be understood by humans (e.g., the Mosaic Decalogue). Given the proper consciousness of God, humans then can apply divine principles to specific problems and situations.

This final section (on the following page) proposes twenty-six lessons (i.e., two quarters of thirteen lessons each) to help increase ethical awareness in the local church. Part One highlights alternative approaches to ethical decisions in light of God's nature. Part One also emphasizes the definitive biblical moral law—the ten commandments of Moses. Part Two takes the principles learned in Part One and applies these to specific ethical considerations.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>The "Ethics Bibliography" handout by Dr. Jack Cottrell for the course, TE 84: Ethics Seminar (Summer 1981), at Cincinnati Christian Seminary was used to organize the topics in Part Two.

*PART ONE: The Nature of God—The Ethical Foundation*

Lesson One	Biblical or Theological Ethics
Lesson Two	God Is Creator of All
Lesson Three	God Is Lord Over All
Lesson Four	God Is Giver of the Law
Lesson Five	God Is Holy & Just
Lesson Six	God Is Jealous for His People
Lesson Seven	God Grants Humans Authority on Earth
Lesson Eight	God Expects Humans to Respect Life
Lesson Nine	God Demands Virtue Among Humans
Lesson Ten	God Requires Humans to be Good Stewards
Lesson Eleven	God Enjoins Truthfulness Among Humans
Lesson Twelve	God Wants Goodwill & Affection to Abound
Lesson Thirteen	The Sum of God's Love for Life

*PART TWO: Specific Ethical Considerations*

Lesson One	Personal Ethics for the Christian
Lesson Two	Overview of Ethical Problems Today
Lesson Three	Issues of Church & State, Part I
Lesson Four	Issues of Church & State, Part II
Lesson Five	Issues of Violence, War, & Revolution
Lesson Six	Issues of Life & Death, Part I
Lesson Seven	Issues of Life & Death, Part II
Lesson Eight	Issues about the Integrity of Human Life
Lesson Nine	Issues of Marriage, the Family, & Sexuality, Part I
Lesson Ten	Issues of Marriage, the Family, & Sexuality, Part II
Lesson Eleven	Issues of Economics & Being Stewards, Part I
Lesson Twelve	Issues of Economics & Being Stewards, Part II
Lesson Thirteen	Ethics & the Life in Christ

## WORKS CITED OR REFERENCED

Cottrell, Jack., editor. *A Handbook on Ethical Problems*. Cincinnati, OH: Cincinnati Christian Seminary, n.d.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Ethics Bibliography." Printed Handout. Cincinnati, OH: Cincinnati Christian Seminary, 1978-1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. *His Way*. Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1979.

ESV. *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002.

Field, David. *Free to Do Right*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973.

Geisler, Norman L. *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971.

Henry, Carl F. H. *Christian Personal Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957.

NIV. *New International Version, Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

NRSV. *The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993.

Shelly, Rubel. *Young People Make Moral Decisions*. University, AL: Youth In Action, 1972.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Barnette, Henlee H. *Introducing Christian Ethics*. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961.

Childress, James F., and John Macquarrie, editors. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986.

Copan, Paul. *Is God A Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011.

Enslin, Morton Scott. *The Ethics of Paul*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1957.

Fretheim, Terence E. *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005.

David W Fletcher, Summer 1981, Revised October 2019

*All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com*

Lillie, William. *Studies in New Testament Ethics*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1961.

Longenecker, Richard N. *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.

Ogletree, Thomas W. *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

Schnackenburg, Rudolf. *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*. Translated by J. Holland-Smith and W. J. O'Hara. New York, NY: Seabury, 1965.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *An Eye for An Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983.