

## Ethical Reflections: Ethics & Logic

Because this space is piggy-backing on my previous column *In the Light of Logic*, perhaps we should correlate the study of logic with the study of ethics. The two are closely entwined, as flip sides of the same coin. Ethics concerns right *conduct*, as logic relates to right *reasoning*. Where logic deals with the reasoning process pertaining to the truth or falsehood of statements, ethics deals with the rightness or wrongness of actions. Both logic and ethics presuppose that truth and goodness are real, and that reasoning logically or ethically can bring us closer to the ideal or the standard. Christians believe that God is the author of Truth and Goodness, and that there are absolute standards to which we can aspire.

Logic is foundational to ethics, because ethics is reasoning about the rightness or wrongness of conduct. That reasoning can either be logical, and conclusions necessarily derived from premises, or illogical and inconsistent. Logic also helps us to think clearly about what is being argued ethically, and whether the basis of an argument has been assumed, or actually proved. Many people argue against the death penalty, for example, assuming that because the taking of the life of a person is involved that death is affirmed rather than life. This conclusion does not follow from the premises. The argument goes something like this. Whatever affirms life should not involve death. The death penalty involves the death of a person. Therefore, the death penalty does not affirm life.

Though this is a valid argument, it is not true because it contains a false premise: the first one. To demonstrate that sometimes death serves life, consider that the near-death experiences of many people have resulted in a much greater appreciation of the value of life, family, health, etc. So in that case, the reality of death served to bring about a greater commitment to life and that which gives life.

Ethical reasoning and reflection is only as good as its standard for what constitutes true goodness. Today, much ethical reflection is proffered that admits to no absolute moral standard, and is thus self-refuting. For instance, if one thinks that there is no absolute moral standard for what constitutes right conduct, then any conclusion about some action being immoral is only a matter of one's personal opinion or taste. Even the sacrifice of innocent children, then, might be perfectly justifiable in some cultures, but I just find it personally distasteful. I could decide to sacrifice you to my gods and you cannot say that what I do is wrong in any meaningful way. All you can do is seek a practical escape, and to run like heck when you see me coming with my knife.

Ethics evaluates our behaviors and seeks to find rightness or wrongness in the things that we choose. We do not pronounce ethical judgments about the behavior of raccoons, because they are not capable of choosing good behavior over bad, or of making such moral judgments. We do not blame raccoons for trying to climb into our garbage cans and spreading trash everywhere, because we know that they are just acting on their instincts.

We humans, however, are not ruled by instinct. We can and must make choices about what to believe and how to act, and we are accountable for our choices because we have choices (i.e., freedom of will). These choices are made in various contexts, and some choices are more apparent than others. Christian ethics sees humans as responsible for their moral choices, even when those choices are made for us unless we choose otherwise. For example, the choice to be racist in the pre-civil rights South did not appear to be a choice but it was. A very few people

refused to comply with the injustice of slavery and bigotry and paid a stiff penalty for it up to and including death. Others could have chosen to resist, but didn't because of fear and self-interest.

Biblically and ethically, strong social pressure to conform to unethical and ungodly social norms does not justify compliance. The Nuremberg Trials in Germany after WW II holding soldiers accountable for "just obeying orders" should have forever eliminated that idea from human experience, but it didn't. It seems that sinful man's commitment to his own comfort usually transcends his interest in ethics, justice, and love.

### Thoughts and Intentions

There are ten facets of our lives as human beings that admit to ethical reflection: feelings, desires, thoughts, intentions, attitudes, words, deeds, habits (addictions), lifestyles and worldviews. Feelings cannot be labeled "bad" in and of themselves, for upon reflection we recognize that we do not directly *choose* our feelings. We feel the way we do as a result of a mixture of factors: temperament, childhood training, experience, education, etc.

Biblically, feelings are an important part of life, and point to important beliefs and attitudes, but they are not "bad" or "wrong" in themselves. There is a time and a place to show anger, so anger is not "bad." And so it is for all human emotions. They all have their place. What we can evaluate is the *appropriateness* of the emotion (e.g., "Am I feeling sad when I should feel glad?"), the *intensity* of the emotion ("should I feel this angry over my child spilling the milk—he's only 3!"), and the *duration* of the feeling ("should I still be depressed about losing my husband's car keys ten years ago?").<sup>1</sup>

Upon reflection, we recognize that we do not always choose our thoughts either. They can often be like images, words or impressions that "flash up on the screen" without our willing them to do so. They may just come in on a train of other thoughts, one thought leading to another. Or sometimes we get a thought that appalls us for its wickedness. But we didn't choose the thought; it just popped up out of somewhere. It is our choice, however, whether to *dwell* on these thoughts or change our mind to think in a different direction. Failing to do so is an example of "wrong" thinking. In general, thoughts, like feelings, are not necessarily right or wrong in themselves. Thoughts must become attached to intentions, desires, words, and actions to bear fruit.

We must learn to ask ourselves if our thoughts are driven by something deeper in our hearts: fear, insecurity, jealousy, envy, hatred, etc. Jesus invited us to look deeply into our hearts to see what drives our desires and intentions.

#### Mark 7:21-23

- (21) "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,
- (22) greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.
- (23) All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

Desire is very basic to human life, and the Bible identifies intense desire or lust as man's basic motivator (1 John 2:16; 2 Peter 1:4; James 1:14 and 15; Ephesians 2:3; 4:22). We would do well to look closely at what we want and ask ourselves deep questions about why we want it. Are our motives pure? Do we want what we want because we are self-centered, greedy, unthankful, or vengeful? We must ask the Lord to help us see the nature of our desires. Also, do our wants line up with what God says we need? Have we decided to want what God's Word says we need?

## The Importance of Intention

As we are beginning to see, Christian ethical reflection begins with an analysis of one's motivations to act, and does not center on the acts themselves. As Hebrews 4:12 (KJV) says, the Word of God is the critic of "the thoughts and intents of the heart." Biblically, a man's intention is crucial, because God "Looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Legally defined, *intent* is "the purpose in carrying out a particular act, such as criminal intent; design, resolve. *Criminal intent* is "the knowledge that one is performing an unlawful act; the intent to commit a crime." A *crime* is "a violation of an existing law (commission), or a failure to perform an act required by law (omission)."

Determination of intent is a lynchpin of our legal system, which is still based largely on the "Judeo-Christian ethic" (i.e., *the Bible*), and determines, for instance, whether a person is guilty of first degree murder, second degree murder, or manslaughter. The act is the same in each case: one person directly causes the death of another person. But what was intended is very different in each case. First-degree murder involves premeditation, or a fully-formed intention. Second-degree murder is generally a crime of passion without any prior intent, although the act of murder itself was intended in the moment. Manslaughter is accidentally causing someone's death with no intention of killing or often even hurting him.

At the end of this age, God and Christ will judge every person who has ever lived. This fact is as real and certain as anything written in the Bible. It would behoove us to know on what basis they will be judging, and use this knowledge to help us build our personal ethical system on this reality. If we understand the ethical standard employed by God and Jesus Christ to determine right from wrong and good from evil, we can bring our lives into alignment and walk uprightly.

The question then must be asked, what is the highest or the best motivation for acting? Jesus modeled it for us: *seeking God's glory*. What does that mean? That by all our choices, whether intentions, words, attitudes and actions we seek to make God known.

### **John 14:12-14**

(12) I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

(13) And I will do whatever you ask in my name, **so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.**

(14) You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Firmly fixing our intention on the glorification of God opens up the floodgates of heaven to us, and we find our prayers answered in miraculous and powerful ways. Seeking His glory is another way of saying that we align our will with God's will, which allows us to reap the benefits of being in an intimate relationship with God. Jesus reiterates the same promise in the same connection in the very next chapter:

### **John 15:7 and 8**

(7) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

(8) This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

By bearing much fruit in our lives we give testimony to our relationship with our Lord and our God. What is the fruit that is to be in evidence? Verses 9-11 give us three specific things: *love, obedience and joy*.

(9) “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my **love**.

(10) If you **obey** my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

(11) I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your **joy** may be complete.”

Our motivation must be considered even when we are talking about obedience to God, because we can obey for the wrong reasons. We are exhorted in God’s Word to obey from the heart. Deuteronomy 30:2 says “obey him [God] with all your heart and with all your soul,” and Colossians 3:22 says to obey earthly masters because we are servants of Christ: “with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.” And we can do that only with an eye toward future rewards when we stand before Christ at his Judgment Seat—“Since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (verse 24).

Verse 25 affirms God’s commitment to an absolute ethical standard: “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.” We would all do well to consider what “there is no favoritism” means. It means that God’s standards for judgment are God’s standards for judgment, and do not change because of His love for one person over another. In other words, we would be wise to take God and His Word seriously, and live accordingly. There will be profit to us now and eternally.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information on the subject of emotions, see our 90 minute teaching tape, *A Biblical View of Our Emotions* (Mar/Apr ‘94).