

Ethical Reflections: Being Truthful - The First Rung of Christian Ethics

Unless otherwise noted all Scripture is taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV)

In the last column, we identified ten facets of our lives as human beings about which we must apply ourselves to ethical reflection. We talked about feelings and thoughts, and recognized that we do not always *directly* choose them. Nevertheless, we are responsible for what we incubate in our hearts and bring to fruition. We said that biblical ethics must begin with an analysis of the contents of our desires, motives, and intents as the most basic consideration. This analysis requires truthfulness, or to be “full of truth.” We have no hope of growing more ethical if we try to skip this step.

Setting our heart on pleasing God and doing the right thing is crucial to actually living righteously, but we will never get around to trying to please God if we are not willing to honestly consider what in our lives might not be pleasing Him. If we focus only on disciplining our flesh and acting “properly,” we will be getting the cart before the horse, or the act before the heart. If our hearts are set primarily on self-satisfaction, for instance, we may do and say many things that might look good but are really “hostile to God” according to God’s Word:

Romans 8:7

For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot.

But how are we to know if our heart is set on the right thing? We have to have *an internal guide* as well as an *external and objective moral standard* by which to evaluate ourselves. For Christians, the internal guide is the spirit of truth, the gift of holy spirit within that guides us toward Christ-likeness. The external standard is the Word of God, which invites us to honest evaluation of our true motives so that we can “walk in the light,” as He is light. One of the chief characteristics of the flesh is its tendency to deception, and we must always be aware of our potential to create and maintain fictional stories to explain the way our lives have gone. If we are divorced, it is because our spouse was a jerk. If we are unemployed, it’s because the economy is bad. Better to live in the stark truth and trust God to meet us. We were not a big enough person to handle the challenges of our marriage. We did not work hard enough or smart enough to sustain our employability, etc. Ethical reflection requires that we face the truth that we are probably more responsible for our condition than we want to admit. Thinking this way gives God the greatest leverage to move our lives toward blessing and abundance. Our faith seems to soar the more connected we get with our own inadequacy and our need for God’s grace and mercy.

When we are in the flesh, it is so easy to deceive ourselves and live in denial of what is truly motivating us. For instance, we may say that we are “standing on principles” when we refuse to congratulate someone who bested us in a contest, telling ourselves that we were cheated in some way. But what may really be going on in our heart is that we envy their success and feel too diminished to be gracious in defeat.

Christian ministers who abuse others sexually might tell themselves that they are helping the person in some way, but what is really motivating them is their fleshly desires and the ego gratification involved.

Whatever action or inaction we take that is motivated by envy, hatred, etc. expresses hostility toward God and a lack of faith in who we are in Christ. Because we can so easily deceive ourselves, Scripture commands us to “put away” our “old man” (KJV), or our “former way of life” (NRSV).

Ephesians 4:22

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts.

This is a good translation, in my opinion, because “the old man” is the old way we conducted our lives, beginning with our attitudes and deceptive desires. We made dishonesty, selfish desires, envy, etc. into a *lifestyle*.

Ephesians 2:3

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

Now we are to make a new life based on Christ, the word of God, and the spirit of God that lives in us.

Ephesians 4:24

And to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

We are to put on this new self as an act of our will, with faith that the spirit of God is in us to support this change of lifestyle. This new lifestyle is based on true righteousness and holiness, with honesty at the foundation. That is why the very first moral commandment that follows concerns honesty:

Ephesians 4:25

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

To speak the truth to our neighbors means that we are speaking the truth first to ourselves, and no longer allowing ourselves to live in deception. If we ask the Lord to reveal the true state of our hearts, he will. It may not be flattering, but it is liberating. When we see that what is really motivating us is fear, doubt, hurt, anger, envy, etc., we can repent and choose to be motivated by love for God and neighbor. As long as we are living in darkness, we have no choice but to walk according to the flesh.

It is a true statement that God is interested in an honest attitude of heart, or “an upright heart,” before he is interested in “right conduct.” This is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. Right conduct will follow from a right heart.

Psalms 51:5, 6, 17

(5) Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

(6) You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

(17) The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

2 Corinthians 4:2

We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Ephesians 4:15a (Amplified)

Rather, let our lives lovingly express truth in all things—speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly.

It is not enough to just change our attitude, although this is basic. We must also shine the light of God's Word and God's spirit on our words, actions, habits (addictions), lifestyles, and worldviews. All must be brought under the obedience of Christ to live the life that he made available. When the Bible refers to our "walk," it is talking about all of those things that are within the power of our will to change—to bring into subjection to Christ.

Christian ethics has to do with proper conduct, but does not just look at the tip of the iceberg. It addresses the root of sinfulness in our hearts and commands us to bring into the light the hidden things, the deceptions, the masks that we wear to protect ourselves from being found out. The funny thing is, God has already found us out in Christ and accepted us long before we were ready to accept that acceptance and come into the light.

Even after being Christian for years, we too often resist the light of ethical scrutiny and avoid self-disclosure. Religion, as opposed to godliness, is often a catalyst to such denial and deception, because it holds out strict standards for right conduct without allowing open disclosure of temptation or sin. The Church ought to be a place for saints to learn to talk openly about the sin that continues to dwell in them, despite their best efforts to renounce it. This is the best way to cleanse the heart, which will then prompt pure hearted words and deeds.

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