

# ***BIBLICAL ETHICS***

*2 Timothy 3:16-17*

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## The Entire Bible, Our Standard Today

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All of life is ethical, and all of the Bible is permeated with a concern for ethics. Unlike the organization of an encyclopedia, our Bible was not written in such a way that it devote separate sections exclusively to various topics of interest. Hence the Bible does not contain one separate, self-contained book or chapter that completely treat the subject of ethics or moral conduct. To be sure, many chapters of the Bible (like Exodus 20 or Romans 13) and even some books of the Bible (like Proverbs or James) have a great deal to say about ethical matters and contain very specific guidance for the believer's life. Nevertheless, there will not be found a division of the Bible entitled something like "The Complete List of Duties and Obligations in the Christian Life." Instead, we find a concern for ethics carrying through the whole word of God, from cover to cover -- from creation to consummation.

This is not really surprising. The entire Bible speaks of God, and we read that the living and true God is holy, just, good, and perfect. These are attributes of an ethical character and have moral implications for us. The entire Bible speaks of the works of God, and we read that all of His works are performed in wisdom and righteousness -- again, ethical qualities. The world which God has created, we read, reveals God's moral requirements clearly and continuously. History, which God governs by His sovereign decree, will manifest His glory, wisdom and justice. The apex of creation and the key figure in earthly history, man, has been made the image of this holy God and has God's law imbedded in his heart. Man's life and purpose take their direction from God, and every one of man's actions and attitudes is called into the service of the Creator -- motivated by love and faith, aimed at advancing God's glory and kingdom. Accordingly the entire Bible has a kind of ethical focus.

Moreover the very narrative and theological plot of the Bible is governed by ethical concerns. From the outset we read that man has fallen into sin -- by disobeying the moral standard of God; as a consequence man has come under the wrath and curse of God -- His just response to rebellion against His commands. Sin and curse are prevailing characteristics, then, of fallen man's environment, history, and relationships. To redeem man, restore him to favor, and rectify his wayward life in all areas, God promised and provided His own Son as a Messiah or Savior. Christ lived a life of perfect obedience to qualify as our substitute, and then died on the cross to satisfy the justice of God regarding our sin. As resurrected and ascended on high, Christ rules as Lord over all, bringing all opposition into submission to His kingly reign. He has sent the Spirit characterized by holiness into His followers, and

among "other things the Holy Spirit brings about the practice of righteousness in their lives. The church of Christ has been mandated to proclaim God's good news, to advance His kingdom throughout the world, to teach Christ's disciples to observe everything He has commanded, and to worship the Triune God in spirit and in truth. When Christ returns at the consummation of human history He will come as universal Judge, dispensing punishment and reward according to the revealed standard of God's word. On that day all men will be divided into the basic categories of covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers; then it will be clear that all of one's life in every realm and relationship has reflected his response to God's revealed standards. Those who have lived in alienation from God, not recognizing their disobedience and need of the Savior, will be eternally separated from His presence and blessing; those who have embraced the Savior in faith and submitted to Him as Lord will eternally enjoy His presence in the new heavens and earth wherein righteousness dwells.

It is easy to see, then, that everything the Bible teaches from Genesis to Revelation has an ethical quality about it and carries ethical implications with it. There is no word from God which fails to tell us in some way what we are to believe about Him and what duty He requires of us. Paul put it in this way: "Every scripture is inspired by God and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). If we disregard any portion of the Bible we will -- to that extent -- fail to be thoroughly furnished for every good work. If we ignore certain requirements laid down by the Lord in the Bible our instruction in righteousness will be incomplete. Paul says that every single scripture is profitable for ethical living; every verse gives us direction for how we should live. The entire Bible is our ethical yardstick, for every bit of it is the word of the eternal, unchanging God; none of the Bible offers fallible or mistaken direction to us today. Not one of God's stipulations is unjust, being too lenient or too harsh. And God does not unjustly have a double standard of morality, one standard of justice for some and another standard of justice for others. Every single dictate of God's word, then, is intended as moral instruction for us today if we would demonstrate justice, holiness, and truth in our lives.

It is important to note here that when Paul said that "every scripture is inspired by God and profitable" for holy living, the New Testament was not as yet completed, gathered together, and existing

as a published collection of books. Paul's direct **reference** was to the well known Old Testament **scriptures**, and indirectly to the **soon-to-be-completed** New Testament. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul taught New Testament believers that **every** single Old Testament writing was **profitable** for their present instruction in righteousness, if they were to be completely furnished for every good work required of them by God. Not one **bit** of the Old Testament has become ethically irrelevant according to Paul. That is why we, as Christians, should speak of our moral viewpoint, not merely as "New Testament Ethics," but as "Biblical Ethics." The New Testament (2 Tim. 3:16-17) requires that we take the Old Testament as ethically normative for us today. Not just selected portions of the Old Testament, mind you, but "**every** scripture." Failure to honor the whole duty of man as revealed in the Old Testament is nothing short of a failure to be completely equipped for righteous living. It is to measure one's ethical duty by a broken and incomplete yardstick.

God expects us to submit to His every word, and not **pick-and-choose** the ones which are agreeable to our preconceived opinions. The Lord requires that we obey everything He has stipulated in the Old and New Testaments -- that we "**live** by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Our Lord responded to the temptation of Satan with those words, quoting the Old Testament **passage** in Deuteronomy 8:3 which began "All the commandment that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do" (81). Many believers in Christ fail to **imitate** His attitude here, and they are quite careless about observing every word of God's command in the Bible. **James** tells us that if a person lives by and keeps every precept or teaching of God's law, and yet he or she disregards or violates it in one single point, that person is actually guilty of disobeying the whole (James 2:10). Therefore, we must take the whole Bible as our standard of ethics, including every point of God's Old Testament law. Not one word which proceeds from God's mouth can be invalidated and made inoperative, even as the Lord declared with the giving of His law: "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it" (Deut. 12:32). The **entire** Bible is our ethical standard today, from cover to cover.

But doesn't the coming of Jesus Christ change all that? Hasn't the Old Testament law been **either** cancelled or at least reduced in its requirements? Many professing believers are misled in the **direction** of

these questions, despite God's clear requirement that nothing be subtracted from His law, despite the straightforward teaching of Paul and James that **every** Old Testament scripture -- **every** point of the law -- has a binding ethical authority in the **life** of the New Testament Christian. Perhaps the best place to go in Scripture to be rid of the theological inconsistency underlying a negative attitude toward the Old Testament law is to the very words of Jesus **himself** on this subject, Matthew 5:17-19. Nothing could be clearer than that Christ here **denies** twice (for the sake of emphasis) that His coming has abrogated the Old Testament law "Do not think that I came to **abolish** the law or the prophets; I did not come to **abolish**." Again, nothing could be clearer than that not even the least significant aspect of the Old Testament law **will** lose its **validity** until the end of the **world**: "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the slightest **letter** or stroke shall **pass** away from the law." And if there could remain any doubt in our minds as to the meaning of the Lord's teaching here, He **immediately** removes it by **applying** His attitude toward the law to our **behavior**: "Therefore **whoever** annuls one of the least of these commandments and teaches others so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." Christ's coming did not **abrogate** anything in the Old Testament law, for every single stroke of the law will abide until the passing away of **this** world; consequently, the follower of Christ is not to teach that even the least Old Testament requirement has been invalidated by Christ and His work. As the Psalmist declared, "Every one of Thy **righteous** ordinances is everlasting" (Ps. 119:133).

So then, all of life is ethical, and ethics requires a standard of right and wrong. For the Christian that yardstick is found in **the Bible** -- the **entire** Bible, from beginning to end. The New Testament **believer** repudiates the teaching of the law itself, of the Psalms, of James, **Paul** and Jesus himself when the Old Testament commandments of God **are** ignored or treated as a mere antiquated standard of justice and righteousness. "The word of our God shall stand **forever**" (1ss. 40:8), and the Old Testament law is part of every word from God's mouth by which we must live (Matt. 23:35).

(For further reading along these lines see **Theonomy** in Christian Ethics. Craig Press, 1977, esp. chapter 2. The book may be ordered from me for \$10.50 at 1219 **Pineview** Drive, Clinton, MS **39056**; include check and address.)

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