

# ***BIBLICAL ETHICS***

*2 Timothy 3:16-17*

Vol. II, No. 7

c Institute for Christian Economics

July, 1979

## **God's Law In New Testament Ethical Themes**

(Part 1)

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The New Testament utilizes a large number of expressions and concepts in communicating moral instruction to God's people --so large that one short study cannot mention them all. The variety of themes found in New Testament ethics helps to drive home to our hearts God's message and demand. It covers our moral obligation from many perspectives, offers us numerous models and motivations for a proper manner of life, and facilitates the production and maintenance of ethical maturity in us.

Yet the large variety of New Testament ethical themes does not imply a correspondingly large diversity of ethical systems or conflicting expectations. God is consistent and changes not (Mal. 3:6); with Him there is no variableness or turning (Jas. 1:17). His word does not equivocate, saying "yes" from one perspective but "no" from another (2 Cor. 1:18; cf. Matt. 5:37). Therefore His standards of conduct do not contradict each other, approving and disapproving of the same things depending upon which theme in New Testament ethics we are considering. The Lord prohibits us from following conflicting authorities (Matt. 6:24) and requires our behavior in the world to reflect "godly sincerity" -- that is, unmixed attitude and singleness of mind or judgment (2 Cor. 1:12).

New Testament ethical instruction thus shows a diversity of expression but a unity of expectation. This is simply to say that all of the various moral themes in the New Testament are harmonious with each other. As we survey a few of these New Testament themes, it will be significant to note how they consistently assume or explicitly propogate the standard of God's Old Testament law -- which, given the unchanging character of God and the consistency of His ethical standards, is not at all surprising. God's law is woven throughout the ethical themes of the New Testament.

### Kingdom Righteousness

The central demand of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is that of a righteousness befitting the kingdom of

God. Righteousness and God's kingdom are intimately related: persecution for the sake of righteousness is rewarded in the kingdom (Matt. 5:10), and the Lord requires a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees in order to enter the kingdom at all (Matt. 5:20). Just as Moses delivered a divine pronouncement from the Mount, asserting God's standard of righteousness, so also Jesus speaks from the mount with God's requirement of righteousness, confirming every detail of even the least commandment in the Old Testament (Matt. 5:19). He proclaimed, "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness!" (Matt. 6:33). How is such kingdom righteousness to be accomplished? Jesus explained in the Lord's prayer: when we ask "Thy kingdom come," we are praying "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). The doing of God's will, which Jesus found in the Old Testament law, is crucial to the New Testament theme of kingdom righteousness.

God is portrayed in the New Testament as a God of righteousness (John 17:25), and the fruit that He brings forth in people is that of righteousness (Eph. 5:9). "If you know that He is righteous, you also know that everyone who practices righteousness has been begotten of Him" (1 John 2:29), and "whosoever does not practice righteousness is not of God" (1 John 3:10). As Paul says, we are not to be deceived: "the unrighteousness shall not inherit the kingdom of God," and as examples of the unrighteous he lists violators of God's law (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Kingdom righteousness, then, is demanded of all believers. "Follow after righteousness" can serve for Paul as a short summary of Timothy's moral duty (1 Tim. 6:11).

But where is the character of this kingdom righteousness to be found for New Testament writers? What does righteousness entail in behavior and attitude? Paul tells Timothy that an all-sufficient "instruction in righteousness" is found in every scripture of the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:16-17), thereby encompassing the law of God found therein. In fact, speaking of the Old

Testament law, Paul categorically declares that “the commandment is . . . righteous” (Rem. 7:12). Kingdom righteousness, therefore, cannot be understood as contrary to the righteous commandments of the King. In Paul’s perspective it is “the doers of the law” who shall be accounted righteous (Rem. 2:13). Righteousness in the New Testament is portrayed as having absolutely no fellowship with lawlessness (the Greek word for “iniquity,” 2 Cor. 6:14). To love righteousness is precisely to hate all lawlessness (Heb. 1:9). God’s law cannot be discarded or despised by those who would practice the righteousness of God’s kingdom according to the New Testament understanding of ethics. That entails, as we have seen, every last commandment in every scripture of the Old Testament -- “uprightness” allows no deviation from perfect conformity to God’s rule (cf. Deut. 6:25).

### The Way of Righteousness

In his second epistle Peter describes New Testament Christianity as “the way of righteousness” (2:21). “The Way” was an early designation for the Christian faith (e.g., Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22), probably stemming from Christ’s own self-declaration that He was “the way” (John 14:6). The expression is adapted throughout the New Testament, where we read of “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17), “the way of God” (Matt. 22:16; Acts 18:26), “the way of the Lord” (Acts 18:25), “the right ways of the Lord” (Acts 13:10), “the way of peace” (Luke 1:79; Rem. 3:17), “the way of truth” (2 Peter 22), and “the right way” (2 Peter 2:15). However the distinctive terminology of 2 Peter 2:21 is “the way of righteousness,” and Peter treats the phrase “the holy commandment” as interchangeable with it in this verse. Professing Christians who know the way of righteousness and then turn back from the holy commandment are apostates. Michael Green says in his commentary here that it is “a fair inference from the text that the first stage in their apostasy was the rejection of the category of law . . . . Rejection of God’s law is the first step to the rejection of God, for God is a moral being” (Tyndale N.T. Comm., P. 120). The “way of righteousness” describes the true kingdom of God in the New Testament. Thus New Testament Christianity cannot be set over against the law of God, opposing its standard, for such opposition would amount to turning away from the holy commandment delivered by our Lord and Savior (cf. 2 Peter 3:2).

Christ himself spoke of “the way of righteousness” in connection with the ministry and message of John the Baptist: “John came unto you in the way of righteousness” (Matt. 21:32). Of course John was preeminently a righteous preacher belonging to the era of the law and prophets (Matt. 11:11, 13). He proclaimed that the coming of God’s kingdom demanded repentance (Matt. 3:2), the confession of sin (3:6), and bringing about the good fruit worthy of repentance (3:8, 10). As the last

preacher in the era of the law and prophets (and forerunner of the Lord), it must be obvious what the standard of sin, repentance, and good fruit would have been for John and his hearers -- the law of God. Confirmation of that is found in the details of his preaching where the requirements of God’s law were expounded (Luke 3:10-14, 19; Mark 6:18). John came in “the way of righteousness,” applying God’s law. This was only to be expected of the one who fulfilled the awaited coming of Elijah to restore all things (Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13). The angelic message of John’s coming birth makes it clear that the ministry of Elijah which John would perform was according to the pattern of Malachi’s prophecy: “Remember the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, even statutes and ordinances. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of Jehovah comes” (Mal. 4:4-5; cf. v. 6 with Luke 1:17). John’s preaching in “the way of righteousness” was anything but antagonistic to the law of the Lord found in the Old Testament. Likewise, those who belong to “the way of righteousness” today must recognize the important place which the law of God has in Christian ethics.

Of course, whether we consider the righteousness of God’s kingdom or the way of righteousness, our attention must be focused on God Himself as the model of all righteousness. The faithful described in Revelation 15 who have been victorious over the Beast are portrayed as singing to the Lord, “righteous and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the ages” (v. 3). Those who extol the righteousness of God here are believers who resisted the Beast’s attempt to replace God’s law with his own (cf. Rev. 13:16 and Deut. 6:8), and the song which they sing is designated “the song of Moses, the servant of God” -- a phrase reflecting Joshua 22:5, “Only take diligent heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of Jehovah commanded you, to love Jehovah your God, and to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and to cleave unto Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

The righteousness of God is expressed in His law. Accordingly the kingdom righteousness demanded by Christ and the apostles and the “way of righteousness” encompassing the Christian faith both assume and apply the law of God. Whenever these themes appear in New Testament ethics, they are expressive of the standard of God’s commandments as found throughout the Old Testament. Such was the understanding of the New Testament writers themselves.

(Corollary reading to this study can be found in my *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Craig Press, 1977. It may be ordered from me for \$10.50 at P. O. Box 720161, Atlanta, Ga. 30328; include check and address.)

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