

# ***BIBLICAL ETHICS***

*2 Timothy 3:16-17*

Vol. [1, No. 9

Institute for Christian Economics

September, 1979

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

(Part III)

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The Good, Well-pleasing, and Perfect Will of God

A passage expressing the ethical themes of holiness and separation from the world is Remans 12:1-2. Paul there says, "Therefore I beseech you, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service; and do not be conformed to this world (age), but rather be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the will of God, the good and well-pleasing and perfect." Going beyond the themes of holiness and separation, Paul speaks of the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God. These same concepts are combined in the benediction at the end of the book of Hebrews: "Now the God of peace.. make you perfect in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen" (13:20-21).

Perhaps the most fundamental ethical concept in either the Old or New Testament is that of the will of God. All ethical decisions and moral attitudes "of God's people must be in accord with the will of the Lord by which He prescribes what is good, or well-pleasing, or perfect in His sight. Anything conflicting with that will is immoral and displeasing to God, quite naturally. Jesus said that His "meat" was to do the will of the Father who sent Him (John 4:34), and that those who were to be deemed members of His family were those who did the will of the heavenly Father (Matt. 12:50); we manifest whose children we are by our righteous behavior or lack of the same (1 John 3:1). Christ taught His disciples to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Doing God's will is not merely a matter of words but of concrete acts of obedience (Matt. 21:28-31); the will of God must be done from the heart (cf. Eph. 6:6). Therefore, not those who cry "Lord, Lord," but only those who do the will of the Father in heaven will enter into the kingdom (Matt. 7:21); those who know the Lord's will and fail to do it will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47). On the other

hand, if a man does the will of God, he will be able to discern the doctrine which comes from God (John 7:17), and his prayers will be heard (John 9:31; cf. 1 John 5:14). While the world and its lusts pass away, he who does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:17).

Consequently Paul can encapsulate New Testament ethics in one stroke, saying "Be not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). Indeed, we are to aim to stand perfect, fully assured in all the will of God (Col. 4:12). Well, where do we learn, understand, and become assured of God's will? The New Testament offers little by way of an explicit answer to such a question. We learn that the will of God stands over against the lusts of men (1 Peter 4:2), and in a very few cases we are told what the will of God specifically requires (e.g., abstaining from fornication and giving thanks in all things, 1 Thes. 4:3; 5:18). However there is no detailed discussion of the requirements of God's will, and concrete guidance in God's will as such is not systematically explored. Why not? Especially since the will of God is such a crucial ethical theme, we might have expected differently. The answer lies in recognizing that the common conviction of the inspired New Testament writers is that the will of God has been given a specific and sufficient explication in the Old Testament already. It is simply assumed that one can speak of "the will of God" without explanation because it is obvious that God's will traces back to the revelation of His will in the law previously committed to scripture. Accordingly 1 Samuel 13:14 can be quoted about David, "a man after My heart who will do all My will" (Acts 13:22), and it is expected that the reader will recall that in the Old Testament setting of this statement David is contrasted with Saul precisely with respect to the keeping of God's commands. Paul convicts those who glory in God and claim to know His will, and yet transgress the law, thereby dishonoring God (Rem. 2:17-18, 23). And John would add, "And hereby we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that says, 'I know Him,' and

keeps not His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). In the New Testament, God's will is assumed to be found in His law and commandments.

The good, goodness, or good works is also a key theme in New Testament ethics. John says, "Beloved, imitate not that which is evil but that which is good. He that does good is of God; he that does evil has not seen God" (3 John 11). Paul declares, "Faithful is the saying, and concerning these things I desire that you affirm confidently, to the end that they who have believed God may be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8). Although guarding diligently the truth that salvation is by grace through faith, Paul nevertheless taught that "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God before prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). By what standard, then, do we judge what is ethically good? Again, the New Testament is here resting on the revelation of God's law for its understanding of the ethical theme of the good. When asked what good thing should be done to inherit eternal life, Jesus responded "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:16-17)-- and He makes it crystal clear that He is referring to the Old Testament law (w. 18-19). Likewise Paul could state without qualification that "the commandment is holy, and righteous, and good..., I consent unto the law that it is good" (Rom. 7:12, 16). Elsewhere he expresses the common outlook of the Christian faith, "we know that the law is good" (1 Tim. 1:8).

New Testament ethics also strives to realize what is well-pleasing unto God. Paul says, "we make it our aim...to be well-pleasing unto Him" because all will appear before His judgment seat to receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:9-10). Elsewhere Paul identifies the kingdom of God with righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, "for he that herein serves Christ is well-pleasing to God" (Rom. 14:17-18). Those who have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness but who walk rather as children of the light, the fruit of which is all goodness, righteousness, and truth, are actually "proving what is well-pleasing unto the Lord" (Eph. 5:9-11). Thus it is basic to New Testament morality that our actions and attitudes should be well-pleasing in the sight of God, but how can we make them so? How does anyone know what pleases God or not? It is unusual for Paul to give a specific or concrete instance (e.g., Phil. 4:18) for this broad concept. However at one point when he does so, it is not difficult to see what his ethical standard was. In Colossians 3:20 Paul instructs children to obey their parents, "for this is well-pleasing in the Lord." The commandments of the law, therefore, can serve and did serve as detailing what is well-pleasing to God, even in New Testament morality.

Perfection is another moral theme of the New Testament which deserves our attention. Paul would have believers "stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12). John discourses against fear because it is inconsistent with being made perfect in love (1 John

4:18), and for John love is tested by adherence to God's commandments (cf. 5:2-3). James teaches that steadfastness through trials will have "its perfect work," so that we are lacking in nothing (1:2-4), and he sees every perfect gift--in contrast to sin--as coming from God above (1:17). With an insight into the special power of sins of the tongue, James tells us that if any man does not stumble in word he is a perfect man (3:2). Studying perfection as a moral concept in the New Testament, we once again are taken back eventually to the standard of God's law. Christ taught that our perfection must be modelled after the heavenly Father: "Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Significantly, this exhortation follows and summarizes a discourse on the full measure of the Old Testament law's demands (w. 21-48). When Christ was later approached by one who presumed to be obedient to the law, Christ taught him that to be perfect he would need to renounce every sin against God's commandments and every hindrance to complete obedience to them (Matt. 19:21). Accordingly we learn that God's law is our standard of moral perfection today. James instructs believers that the man who is blessed of God is the one who is a doer of the word he has heard, having "looked into the perfect law" (Jas. 1:25).

We may return now to Romans 12:2, where Paul's ethical guidance to the New Testament believer is to follow the will of God, that which is good, well-pleasing, and perfect. We have seen that the New Testament consistently assumes as common knowledge and explicitly applies the truth that the commandments of God's law in the Old Testament are a sufficient and valid standard of God's will, of the good, of the well-pleasing to the Lord, and of perfection. Whenever these themes appear in the New Testament scriptures the authority of God's law is repeatedly being applied. Our obligation to that law is reinforced many times over when Paul summarizes the ethical standard for New Testament morality as "the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God." God himself is to receive the glory for bringing our lives into conformity with this unchallengeable norm for Christian conduct. He is the One who, through the ministry of His Son, makes us "perfect in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight" (Heb. 13:20-21).

Every attempt to reject the law of God in the New Testament era meets with embarrassment before the text of the New Testament itself. The righteousness of God's kingdom, the way of righteousness, holiness and sainthood, separation from the world, and the good, well-pleasing, perfect will of God all require that our behavior conform to the standard of God's commandments as revealed once and for all in the Old Testament. This standard is woven implicitly throughout New Testament ethical teaching.

(For corollary reading to this study, see my *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Craig Press, 1977. It may be ordered for \$10.50 from meat P. O. Box 720161, Atlanta, Ga. 30328).