

# BIBLICAL ETHICS

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Vol. I, No. 4

C Institute for Christian Economics

December, 1978

## God's Unchanging Holiness and Law

by Greg L. Bahnsen, Th.M., Ph.D.

There is a sense in which the aim of every man's life is to be like God. All men are striving to imitate God in one way or another. Of course not all attempts to be like God are honored by the Lord and rewarded with His favor, for there is a radical difference between submitting to the Satanic temptation to be like God (Gen.3:5) and responding to Christ's injunction that we should be like God (Matt. 5:48). The first is an attempt to replace God's authority with one's own, while the second is an attempt to demonstrate godliness as a moral virtue.

The basic character of godly morality was made manifest in the probation or testing placed upon Adam and Eve in the Garden. God had granted them permission to eat of any tree of the garden, save one. They were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil -- not because its fruit was injected with some literal poison that was not good for them, but as a test of whether they would live solely under the authority of God's word to them. God had forbidden it. Would they, despite their empirical research and personal desires, submit to His command on His simple say-so? Would they do their duty on the sheer basis that it was their duty? Or would they evaluate the command of God on the basis of some external standard of reasonableness, practicality, and human benefit? The outcome of the story is all too well known. Satan beguiled Eve, denying what God had told her, and thereby leading her to assume the authoritative, neutral position of determining for herself whether God's "hypothesis" or Satan's "hypothesis" was true. Satan implied that God's commands were harsh, too stringent, unreasonable. He in effect condemned the supreme, absolute, and **unchallengable** authority of God. He went on to suggest that God is in fact jealous, prohibiting Adam and Eve from eating of the tree lest they become like Him -- lest they become rivals to Him in determining what is good and evil. Thus our first parents were led to seek a lifestyle which was not bound by law from God; thus they were tempted into deciding for themselves what would count as good and evil. Law would not be laid down to them by God, for they would lay it down for themselves. Demonstrating sin's lawlessness (1 John 3:4) they became "like God" -- law-givers of their own making and **authority**. God's law, which should have been their delight, became burdensome to them.

By contrast, the second Adam, Jesus Christ, lived a life of perfect obedience to the laws of God. When Satan tempted Him to depart from the path of utter obedience to God's commands, the Savior replied by

quoting from the Old Testament law: you are not to tempt the Lord your God, you are to worship and serve Him alone, and you are to live by every word that proceeds from His mouth (Matt. 4:1-11). Here we have the very opposite of Adam and Eve's response to Satan. Christ said that the attitude which in genuinely godly recognizes the moral authority of God alone, does not question the wisdom of His dictates, and observes every last detail of His word, This is man's proper path to God-likeness. To live in this fashion displays the image or likeness of God that man was originally intended to be (Gen.1:27), for it is living "in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph.4:24). Genuine godliness, as commanded in the Scripture, is gained by imitating the holiness of God on a creaturely level -- not by audacious attempts to redefine good and evil in some area of life on your own terms.

Jesus concluded His discourse on God's law in the Sermon on the Mount by saying, "Therefore you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Those who are not striving to become rivals to God by replacing His commands according to their own wisdom will rather endeavor to reflect His moral perfection by obeying all of His commands. John Murray has said,

We cannot suppress the generic character of this statement, 'Ye therefore shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'. It covers the whole range of divine perfection as it bears upon human behavior, and it utters the most ultimate consideration regulative of human disposition and conduct. The reason of the biblical ethic is God's perfection; the basic criterion of ethical behavior is God's perfection; the ultimate goal of the ethical life is conformity to God's perfection. And shall we say that this standard can ever cease to be relevant? It is to trifle with sanctities which ever bind us as creatures of God, made in His image, to think that anything less than perfection conformable to the Father's own could be the norm and the goal of the **believer's** ethic (Principles of Conduct).

God expects of His people nothing less than full conformity to His holy character in all of their thoughts, words, and deeds. They must emulate His perfection in every aspect of their lives,

As Murray says, this standard of ethics ever binds the believer and never ceases to be relevant. This standard is just as authoritative and valid today as it was in the Old Testament. According to the Old

**Testament** ethic God's holiness was the model for human conduct: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev.19:2). This is also the precise model of moral conduct for the New Testament believer: "but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' " (1 Peter 1:15-16). There has been no alteration or reduction of the standard of moral behavior between the Old and New Testaments. God's permanent requirement over all of life is God-imitating holiness. In all ages believers are required to display throughout their lives the holiness and perfection of their God. They ought to be like God, not in the Satanic sense which amounts to lawlessness but in the biblical sense which entails submission to God's commands.

Obviously, if we are to model our lives on the perfect holiness of God we need Him to tell us what the implications of this would be for our practical behavior. We need a perfect yardstick by which to measure holiness in our lives. The Bible teaches us that the Lord has provided this guide and standard in His holy law (cf. Rom 7:12). The law is a transcript of the holiness of God on a creaturely level; it is the ultimate standard of human righteousness in any area of life, for it reflects the moral perfection of God, its Author. The intimate relation which the law bears to the very person of God is indicated by the fact that it was originally written by the finger of God (Deut. 9:10) and deposited in the ark of the covenant which typified the throne and presence of God in the Holy of Holies (Deut.10:5). Moreover, this law must be acknowledged to have a very special place or status because it has the exclusive qualities of God himself attributed to it. According to Scripture, God alone is holy (Rev. 15:4), and good (Mark 10:18). Yet God's law is likewise designated holy and good (Rom. 7:12, 16; 1 Tim. 1:8), and obedience to it is the standard of human good (Deut.12:28; Ps.119:68; Micah 6:8). God is perfect (Deut.32:4; Ps. 18:30; Matt. 5:48), and the law which He has laid down for us is accordingly perfect (Ps. 19:7; James 1 :25). Every statute revealed by God authoritatively defines the holiness, goodness, and perfection which God's people are to emulate in every age.

The Puritans were zealous to live in the moral purity which reflects God's own. Consequently they upheld the honor and binding quality of every command from God. The feeling of Thomas Taylor was typical of them: "A man may break the Prince's Law, and not violate his Person; but not God's: for God and his image in the Law, are so straitly united, as one cannot wrong the one, and not the other" ( **Regula Vitae**, The Rule of the Law under the Gospel, 1631). If God turned back His law, said Anthony Burgess, He would "deny his own justice and goodness" (**Vindiciae Legis**, 1646). **Thus** the Puritans **did** not, like many modern believers, tamper with or annul any part of God's law. "To find fault with the Law, were to find fault with God" (Ralph Venning, **Sin, the Plague of Plagues**, 1669). Therefore, in Puritan

theology the law of God, like its author, was eternal (cf. Edward Elton, God's Holy Mind Touching Mattera Moran. 1625), and as such "Christ hath expunged no part of it" (John Crandon, Mr. Baxter's Aphorisms exorcized and Authorized, 1654). Unlike modern theologians who evaluate God's requirements according to their cultural traditions and who follow the Satanic temptation to define holiness according to their own estimate or moral purity, the Puritans did not seek schemes by which to shrink the entire duty of man in God's law to their preconceived notions. Venning concluded, "Every believer is answerable to the obedience of the whole Law. "

As usual, the Puritans were here eminently scriptural. God's holiness is the standard of morality in Old and New Testaments, and that holiness is reflected in our lives by obeying His every commandment. "Sanctify yourselves, therefore, and be ye holy, for I am the Lord your God. And ye shall keep my statutes and do them" (Lev. 20:7-8). And a life that is truly consecrated to God, one which is genuinely holy, respects every dictate from God. He says that the way to "be holy to your God" is to "remember to do all My commandments" (Num. 15:40). To lay aside any of God's law or view its details as inapplicable today is to oppose God's standard of holiness; it is to define good and evil in that area of life by one's own wisdom and law, to become a rival to God as a law-giver. Of course this suppression of God's own standard of moral perfection -- the transcript of His holiness in the law -- is a blow at the very heart of biblical ethics. It is to be "God-like" in exactly the wrong way. It is to seek moral perfection for some aspect of life originally covered by God's law, but now according to one's own determinations of good and evil. This was the untoward character of Adam's rebellion against God's holy word, His own law replaced God's.

The law reflects the holiness of God, and God's holiness is a permanent standard of morality. Moreover, God's character is eternal and unchanging. "I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal.3:6). There is no variability in Him (James 1:17). From everlasting to everlasting He is God (Ps. 90:2). Therefore, because His holiness is unchanging, the law which reflects that holiness cannot be changed. Whether we read in the Old or New Testaments, we find that a man's attitude toward God's law is an index of his relationship to God himself (Ps. 1; Rom. 8:1-8). As John so plainly says, "The one who says 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). God's unchanging holiness and thereby His unchanging law is an abiding standard of knowing Him and being like Him.

(For further reading along these lines see **Theonomy** in Christian Ethics. Craig Press, 1977, esp. chapter 5 and appendix 3. The book may be ordered from me for \$10.60 at 1219 Pineview Drive, Clinton, MS 39056; include check and address. )

Biblical Ethics is published every month by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. It is mailed free of charge to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. **Subscriptions:** 713 W. Cornwallis Rd., Durham, NC. Donations are fully tax deductible; checks should be made out to Institute for Christian Economics.