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Christ's Perfect Righteousness, Our Model

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The Bible was written over many years, by many people, and about many things. Yet central to the Bible is the person of Jesus Christ. He is of paramount importance throughout. We know that He was, as the Word of God, active at the creation of the world (John 13), and that He providentially upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). After Adam's fall into sin through disobedience to God's command, relief from the wrath and curse of God was promised in terms of one who, as the seed of the woman, would crush Satan (Genesis 3:15). The entire Old Testament prepares for the coming of this promised Messiah -- the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), priest (Psalm 110:4), and king (Isaiah 9:6-7) of God's own choosing. The New Testament gospels tell us of His life and saving ministry, and Acts tells us of the work He continued to do through His church. The epistles are letters written from Him through His chosen servants (e.g., Galatians 1:1) to His elect people, who constitute His kingdom. The final prophetic book of the Bible is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." His church now labors to make all nations His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20), and at the consummation of history Christ will return again to judge all mankind (Acts 17:31). From beginning to end, the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ who is "the Alpha and the Omega" (Revelation 22:13). He is the key to God's special revelation and the one who should have pre-eminence in our lives (Colossians 1:18).

It is easy to understand why. Because of our sinful disobedience to God's commandments Christ came to atone for our offenses and become our eternal Savior. As such He deserves our undying devotion and gratitude. As the resurrected and ascended Son of God, Christ is Lord over all and deserves our obedience and service. The lifestyle and ethic of those who have been redeemed by Christ as Savior and Lord, then, will naturally center or focus on Him. At many times in the history of the church Christian living has been understood most generally as "the imitation of Christ." Because Christ is the central personage of the Bible, there is a sense in which Biblical ethics can likewise be summarized as imitating Christ -- striving to be like Him, taking His behavior as the model of Christian ethics. Indeed, to take upon oneself the name of "Christian" is to be a disciple or follower of Christ (cf. Acts 11:26). Believers take their direction from the example and teaching of Christ. Accordingly, Biblical ethics is the same as **Christ-ian** ethics.

What specifically can be said about a Christ-like ethic of morality? If we wish to imitate the moral perfection of Christ, what will this entail? A short survey of Biblical teaching discloses that God does not save His chosen people by lowering His moral standards; the very reason why those people need His saving mercy is because they have violated His

moral standards. If such standards were expendable or arbitrary, then God could choose to ignore their transgression and save people by sheer fiat or decree of pardon. However the law could not be thus ignored. To save His people God sent His only-begotten Son to die sacrificially in their place. In order to qualify as the Savior, Christ lived a life of perfect obedience to the commandments of God. In order to atone for sins, Christ died in alienation from the Father to satisfy the law's demand for punishment. Consequently in His life and death Christ perfectly obeyed the law of God, and this has unavoidable implications for Christian ethics -- for imitating the Christ portrayed throughout the Bible.

The Scriptures regard the work of Christ as that of obedience. In defining the purpose of His Messianic advent, Christ said "I have come down from heaven to do the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). The pivotal event in the accomplishment of redemption was Christ's laying down His life and taking it up again -- His death and resurrection; in these things Christ was obeying His Father's commandment (John 10:17-18). His work of atonement was performed in the capacity of a suffering servant (cf. Isaiah 52:13-53:12). As such He was subjected to the law (Galatians 4:5) and justified us by His obedience (Romans 5:19). So then, obedience to the will and commandment of God was crucial to the life and ministry of our Savior. As our great High Priest He was sacrificed to discharge the curse of the law against our sin (Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 2:17-3:1; 4:14-5:10). As the prophet of the law, Christ rendered its proper interpretation and peeled away the distorting traditions of men (Matthew 5:17-48; 15:1-20). And because He obeyed the law perfectly and hated all lawlessness, Christ has been exalted as the anointed King (Hebrews 1:8-9). Therefore we see that Christ's saving work and His three-fold office are determined by His positive relation to the law of God, the permanent expression of His holy will.

As one could readily expect, since Christ is the exact representation of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3) and since the law is a transcript of the holiness of God, Christ embodied the law perfectly in His own person and behavior. Christ challenged His opponents with the stunning -- virtually rhetorical -- question, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46). Of course, no one could, for Christ alone was in a position to declare, "I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10). Christ was tempted at every point with respect to obeying the commands of God, yet He remained sinless throughout (Hebrews 4:15). Because He kept the law perfectly, Christ had no need to offer up sacrifice for His own sins (Hebrews 7:26-28). Instead He offered Himself up without spot to God, a lamb without blemish as the law required, in

order to cleanse us of our sins (Hebrews 9: 14). As the Old Testament had foretold, "righteousness will be the belt about His loins" (Isaiah 11:5), and the Messiah could declare "Thy law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:7-8; Hebrews 10:4-10).

We read in Galatians 4:4 that "when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them that were under the law." Christ was neither lawless nor above the law; He submitted to its every requirement, saying "it becomes us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). He directed the healed to offer the gift commanded by Moses (Matthew 8:4), kept the borders of His garments (9:20; 14:36), paid the temple tax (17:24-27), attended to the purity of the temple (21:12-17), etc. He directed His followers to do those things which conformed to the law's demand (Matthew 7:12), told the rich young ruler to keep the commandments (19:17), reinforced the Old Testament law by summarizing it into two love commandments (22:40), indicted the Pharisees for making God's commandments void through traditions of men (Mark 7:6-13), and insisted that even the most trite or insignificant matters of the law ought not to be left undone (Luke 11:42). Speaking of the moral teaching of Christ, Herman Ridderbos says, "It is the 'ethics' of **obedience** in the full sense of the word . . . If, therefore, the question is asked by what Jesus' commandments are regulated, the ultimate answer is only this: by God's will as it is revealed in his law . . . Jesus' ethical preaching does not have a deeper ground than the law as the revelation of God's will to Israel, the people of the covenant. Again and again it is the law, and only the law, the meaning and purpose of which is also the meaning and purpose of Jesus' commandments" (The Coming of the Kingdom, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1862, pp. 290-291). In the light of these things we recall how Jesus severely warned His followers not even to begin to think that His coming had the effect of abrogating even the slightest letter of the law; teaching that even the least commandment had been annulled would eventuate in one's demotion in the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:17-19). Throughout His life and teaching, then, Jesus upheld the law's demands in the most exacting degree.

Moreover, Christ submitted to the law of God even to the very point of suffering its prescribed penalty for sin. He died the death of a criminal (Philippians 2:8), taking upon Himself the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13) and canceling thereby the handwriting which was against us because of the law (Colossians 2:14). "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities . . . Jehovah has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4-6). Sin cannot avoid the dreadful judgment of God (Nahum 1:2-3; Habakkuk 1:13), and therefore God does not save sinners without righteousness and peace kissing each other (Psalm 85:9-10); He remains just, while becoming the justifier of His people (Romans 3:26). Accordingly the law's demands could not be arbitrarily pushed aside. Christ had to come and undergo the curse of the law in the place of His chosen people; He had to satisfy the justice of God. That is why it can be said that the death of Christ is the outstanding evidence that God's law cannot be ignored or abrogated. According to

the law there is no remission of sin apart from the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22; Leviticus 17:11). "Therefore it was necessary" that Christ offer up himself in sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:23-26). The necessity of the law's continuing validity is substantiated by the saving death of Christ on our behalf. Christians should be the last people to think or maintain that they are free from the righteous requirements of God's commandments. Those who have been saved are in need of that salvation because God's law will not be ignored as they transgress it, and they have been saved by Christ necessarily living and dying by all of the law's stipulations. Although our own obedience to the law is flawed and thus cannot be used as a way of justification before God, we are saved by the imputed obedience of the Savior (1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9). Our justification is rooted in His obedience (Romans 5:17-19). By a righteousness which is alien to ourselves -- the perfect righteousness of Christ according to the law -- we are made just in the sight of God. "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf in order that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It turns out, then, that Christ's advent and atoning work do not relax the validity of the law of God and its demand for righteousness; rather they accentuate it. Salvation does not cancel the law's demand, but simply the law's curse: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). He removed our guilt and the condemning aspect of the law toward us, but Christ did not revoke the law's original righteous demand and obligation. Salvation in the Biblical sense presupposes the permanent validity of the law. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit indwelling all true believers in Jesus Christ makes them to grow into likeness to Christ -- "to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13,15; cf. Galatians 4:19). Christian ethics is a matter of imitating Christ, and for that reason it does not call us to flee from the law but to honor its requirements. We are to have in ourselves the attitude which was in Christ Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient (Philippians 2:5,8). We are to follow in His steps of righteous behavior (1 Peter 2:21), showing forth righteousness because the Holy Spirit unites us to Him (1 Corinthians 6:15-20). The Biblical ethic, then, is the Christian ethic of following after the example of Christ's obedience to God's law. John expresses this point clearly: "Hereby we know that we are in Him: he that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked" (1 John 2:5-6). And as we have abundantly seen above, Christ walked according to the commandments of God. We cannot escape the conclusion that the Christian ethic is one of obedience to God's law, for Christ's perfect righteousness according to that law is our model of Christian living.

From beginning to end the Bible centers on Jesus Christ. From beginning to end His life was lived in conformity to the law of God. And from beginning to end the Biblical ethic of imitating Christ calls us likewise to obey every command of God's word. (For further reading along these lines see Theonomy in Christian Ethics, Craig Press, 1977, chapter 6; it may be ordered for \$10.50 from me at 1219 Pineview, Clinton, MS 39356).

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