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2 Timothy 3:16-17

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The Morality With Blessed Consequences

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We have said earlier that all of life is ethical: people are constantly making moral decisions, forming attitudes, and setting goals. We have also noted that there are many competing views of ethics. Let us delineate three basic approaches to ethical decision-making and ethical evaluating of ourselves, our actions, and our attitudes. First, some people weigh all moral issues and make their choices according to a norm or standard of good and evil. Second, others will determine how actions and attitudes are to be morally graded on the basis of one's character -- his traits, intentions, or motives. Third, there will be others who see the consequences which follow from a person's behavior as counting the most in ethical planning and evaluating; if the results which come from some action (or the anticipated results) are beneficial (or more beneficial than alternatives), then the action is deemed morally good and acceptable. In summary we can call these the normative, motivational, and consequential approaches to ethics. (Sometimes the technical designations are rendered as the deontological, existential, and teleological approaches to ethics.)

Not only did we earlier observe that all of life is ethical, and that there are many perspectives on ethics from which to choose, we also commented that the Bible has a focus on ethics from beginning to end. Interestingly enough, the Bible's permeation with ethical concerns is expressed along the lines of all three of the ethical perspectives we have just outlined. That is, the Bible looks to the standard which we are to follow, encourages a certain kind of character and motivation in us, and sets before us goals or consequences we should pursue.

The normative and motivational perspectives have been somewhat explored already. We have seen that God has lovingly and graciously set down in His inspired word a code of moral behavior for His creature to follow; the commandments or law of God constitute the norm of ethics for all men, whether they accept it or not. God's law is found throughout the Bible and is fully valid as a standard of morality today. This is a uniform standard, binding all men in all ages, for it reflects the unchanging holiness of God. It was this law which Christ perfectly obeyed as our Savior, thereby leaving us an example to follow, and it

is this law which the Holy Spirit fulfills in us by sanctifying us daily. Thus the Bible gives us the law of God as our normative approach to morality; when God the Lawgiver speaks, His voice is one of authority and must be obeyed. His standard is absolute -- unqualified, all-embracing, and beyond challenge.

We have also seen the kind of character which God requires in those who meet His favor. The moral man is one characterized by a holiness which reflects the nature of God -- as expressed in His revealed law. The follower of Christ will attempt to emulate the Savior's virtues -- as corresponding to God's law. The genuinely Spiritual man will follow the leading of God's Spirit -- thereby walking in the paths of God's commandments. What we see, then, is that the motivational approach to ethics is not to be divorced from, or set in contrast to, the normative approach to ethics. Christians will want the grace of God that saved them to be manifest in their actions and attitudes; they will want to live out every moment of life in a faithful and loving way so as to be a witness to what God's faithful love has done for them. And again, when we look at Scripture to find the implications of a gracious lifestyle which is characterized by faith and love, we learn that God's law shows us our way. The motivational and normative approaches to ethics, therefore, go hand in hand in the word of God.

Let us now turn to the consequential approach to ethics according to the Bible. Consequences are important when we evaluate our past actions or contemplate future decisions. Paul communicates this well in saying that we would have to be deceived to think God could be mocked. Evil living will not bring about happiness and blessing, for then the justice and holiness of our God would be a mockery. Rather, says Paul, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). Those who live according to their rebellious nature will suffer corruption, while those who live by God's Spirit will gain eternal life (v. 8). And on that basis Paul exhorts believers, "let us not be weary in well-doing." Why? Because "in due season we will reap, if we faint not" (v. 9). It is noteworthy here that Paul focuses on the benefits which will accrue to us if we engage in well-doing. It is not -- contrary to modern-day

versions of Christian asceticism -- somehow ignoble or sub-ethical for a Christian to be motivated by the thought of reward for righteous living. God often sets before us the prospect of divinely granted benefits as an incentive for moral living.

For instance, Jesus said "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things (daily provisions of life) shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). Paul taught that "Godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). The Old Testament prophet Malachi exhorted God's people that if they would obey Him (here, by bringing in their tithes), God would open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing for which there would not be enough room to take in (Mal. 3:10). Even earlier, the great leader of the Israelites, Moses, had written that obedience to the Lord would result in blessings on the society's children, crops, rain, herds, cities, and fields; it would bring peace to the people from without and prosperous economy and health from within (Deut. 7:12-15; 11:13-15; 28: 1-14; 30:15, 19; Lev. 26: 3-12). In ethical decision-making, then, we should properly consider the end, aim, or consequences of our behavior.

Doing the right thing or having a proper attitude will result in benefits, But benefits for whom? Should our aim be to benefit ourselves, the other person, or the society as a whole? The Bible indicates that each of these is a subordinate, but vital, interest we should have. For example, when Christ commands, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 22: 39), He tells us to seek the benefit of the other just as we seek our own benefit. Hence Paul tells husbands to love their wives (the other) as their own bodies (the self) precisely because nobody hates himself (Eph. 5:28-29). Egoism (note: not egotism) and altruism both have a place in Christian ethics. So does a concern for the wider collection of people in one's society. Thus the Bible often exhorts the interest of the one to be relinquished for the benefit of the many (e. g., 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 1 :24). However, all of these interests are subordinate to the one supreme goal for all of our actions: the kingdom of God. Within that kingdom the varying interests of one's self, the other, and the many are all harmonized. Our Lord plainly declared that we were to "Seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. " The Kingdom of Christ is to have top priority when we contemplate the consequences of our actions, for Christ has pre-eminence over all (Col. 1 :18). It will be for our good, our neighbor's good, and our society's good if all of our actions and attitudes are governed by an interest in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

So then, how do we pursue that kingdom? How do we gain the benefits which God promises to those who will live according to His righteousness? Obviously, by obeying the King and manifesting His righteousness in our lives. God's word shows us how to do just that by setting down the law of the Lord for us. The law, that is, is a pathway to divine benefits -- not an ugly, dour, painful course for believers. It is not only a demand, it is something to desire! As John said, "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). They are the delight of the righteous man who receives God's blessing (Ps. 1). If we wish to have a morality which promises blessed consequences, then our morality must be patterned after the law of God.

Consider what God's word says about following the commandments of God. It brings to us life and well-being (Deut. 30: 15-16), blessing and a strong heart that does not fear (Ps. 119:1-2; 112: 5-7). Obedience produces peace and security (Ps. 119:28, 165, 175; Prov. 13:6; Luke 6:46-48). The Lord's lovingkindness is upon those who obey His precepts (Ps. 103: 17-18), and they walk in liberty (Ps. 119:45; Jas. 2:25). As indicated already above, keeping God's word results in prosperity with respect to all of our daily needs and interests (cf. Joshua 1 :7). Moreover, collective obedience will bring blessing upon a society as well. "Righteousness exalts a nation" (Prov. 14:34), giving it health, food, financial well-being, peace, and joyous children.

In short, we see that a consequential approach to ethics cannot be functional without the normative approach as well; the two work together because the way blessing is diligent obedience to the law of God. Seeking first the righteousness of Christ's kingdom requires heartfelt obedience to the dictates of the King, and in response to that He grants us every blessing for this life and the next. We see again, then, why the validity or authority of God's law cannot be dismissed today. Without that law we would be lost when it comes to pursuing the benefit of ourselves, others, and our society in all of our moral actions and attitudes. As God clearly says, He has revealed His law to us for our good (Deut. 10:13). Opponents of God's law, therefore, cannot have our good genuinely in mind; they wittingly and unwittingly mislead us into personal and social frustration, distress, and judgment (Prov. 14:12).

(For further reading along these lines see *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Craig Press, 1977, esp. chapter 24. The book may be ordered from me for \$10.50 at 1219 Pineview Dr., Clinton, MS 39056; include check and address.)

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