

"THE MEANING OF ETHICS"

Sixth in a Series of Sermons on

the Book of Romans

Text: Romans 12: 2-21

by

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"Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

"For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

--- Romans 12: 2-21

This is the way Paul concludes the letter to the Romans. He summons the Christians in Rome to build creative relationships inwardly and outwardly. Paul's emphasis is individual but the implications are clearly social.

Ethics from the Christian perspective is an individual responsibility as well as a community involvement; for us the two are inseparable. Here we differ with movements which are either one or the other.

Mysticism, for example, is the absorption and total preoccupation of the self with the self. Theoretical spiritual additives are generously thrown in to keep alive the sense of wonder and mystery. The emphasis, therefore, of mysticism is stark and separate individualism. The result is an esoteric form of ethics

completely dependent upon the individual's own criteria which is inwardly controlled in the last analysis. I respond outwardly when I feel like it and toward what appeals to my present state of mind.

An opposite view of ethical involvement is characterized by Marxism. In the case of Marxism an outward fact takes precedence over everything inward or individual and that outward fact is the dialectic of history, the revolution. The inward sense of individual values and even interpersonal values are de-emphasized by total obligation to the whole.

Both of these opposites result in a simplified ethical challenge for the individual. In the first case obligation originates from within the chasm of my own feelings and desire. Therefore what feels good is good. In the second instance, such personal problems as being true to the self (truth telling), etc., are subordinated to the clearcut goals of the revolution. For the sake of the good of the masses I am then emancipated from all personal inner obligation.

The Christian is called to a harder task than these two by far. The Christian is called as Christ's servant to inner integrity and self-acceptance: This is freedom; and to outward social obligation as Christ's servant for the neighbor and the social whole: This is discipleship. Christian ethics is individual and interpersonal. It is the private unique choice and the social implication. How exactly do Christians make ethical choices? If we reject the simple appeal to our immediate feelings or the over-riding "social ends justify means" of most social movements, then how do we come up in particular situations with Christian solutions to complicated human issues?

First of all let us consider the dynamics that are involved in all human decision making. Choices are made in present, immediate situations, and these choices both large and small, are primarily determined by how we feel about the other two tenses of our existence: the past and the future. Ponder for a moment these two crucial tenses:

The Past Tense: What I do now in the present is greatly affected by what has happened in the past tenses of my life. The residue of past disappointments that I have toward other people is a good example. I know of people who are unable to establish meaningful friendships on a day by day basis because in the past they were disappointed in a friendship they once had. My own past failures and the cumulation of past defeat is another roadblock to an individual's ability to cope creatively with the present situation. In this case, my own previous failures unnerve present self-confidence at trying. Another destructive force is the gnawing presence of old battles from the past that are kept alive long after the armistice. In this case there are real, though usually exaggerated injuries that are not permitted to fade away because they serve in the present as an excuse for our own brutality or apathy toward situations and people who remind us of the old warfare. Such a person lives the most tragic existence of all because he lives hurtfully toward others and feels justified in doing so because of the deception in his own mind that previous grievances have a sacrosanct right to influence the present. He allows himself the right to condemn and write off anyone who may even remotely appear similar to an ancient enemy.

No one escapes this simple fact that the past when unresolved makes an individual a very poor observer of the present and blunts all realistic and creative encounter with the present unique situation. Gunnar Myrdal in his classic book Asian Drama, accuses both Communist and Western scholars with this past tense infirmity. He maintains that Marxist writers have never been good social

scientists because of a predetermined adherence to past tense conclusions and this gravely hinders their studies of the Asian situation. "In the Communist countries, bias is massively and systematically incorporated in the approach to all social, economic and political problems, and has been hardened into a stale dogma.... It is no accident that we may search in vain for important and original contributions by social scientists in the Communist countries to the scientific discussion of development problems in the poor countries." p.11, Asian Drama.

He also accuses Western scholars of an unresolved past tense too. He maintains that Westerners cannot get over a colonial period mentality in their view of South Asia and their feelings of guilt or pride for that colonial heritage have blurred the ability to see problems clearly and afresh in 1969.

The Christian has all of the same variety of past tenses at work within his life too, but if he has the courage to look, there is a new fact that startles him. Across the path of both bad and good past tenses has come Jesus Christ; therefore, I am called to make present tense decisions in defiance of the past. Paul puts it this way in Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world." J. B. Phillips has translated this phrase to "Do not let the world squeeze you into its own pattern...." Karl Barth electing the alternate Greek text translates the sentence as follows:

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God -- which is your veritable worship of God! -- and not to fashion yourselves according to the present form of this world, but according to its coming transformation, by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the will of God, even what is good and acceptable and perfect."

- The Epistle to the Romans  
p. 424 - Karl Barth

In other words, because of the victory of Jesus Christ we need not allow the past to mortgage the future or present. The past has lost its invincibility for the Christian and this liberation from my own sins, the sins of others and the old battles of the past enables me to consider the present on its own merits and make a genuinely relevant, liberated move in the present. The past has its true importance in having granted the resource of experience, but Christ's victory over death has disarmed it of permanence and, therefore, I can defy its negative grip upon the present move. How does this work in actual practice? Perhaps a particular present issue involves people or groups who have in the past done harm. Paul warns us "do not be squeezed by a bad past tense but be transformed by a new mind." If I take the gospel seriously I am forced to allow the situation today to take on a new shape and if I obey the gospel and do not unmercifully load the present tense with my previous anger, then it is very probable that a genuine new can occur.

But the future tense is even more crucial than the past. How I look at the future will influence what I do in the present more profoundly than how I suffer from the past.

If I hold unrealistic myths and project them into the future, then all effective present tense action is distorted. In a recent issue of the Atlantic Monthly a leading authority on the Middle East Charles Yost has written a fascinating article that indicates how disastrous futuristic myth can become. The

article is entitled "The Myths that Block Peace." He has this to say:

"The principal myths on the Israeli side are (1) the belief that places holy to Jews must be under exclusive Israeli administration, regardless of whether or not they are also holy to Muslims and Christians; (2) the feeling that superior political, technological, and commercial competence on the part of the Israelis (at least those of European origin) confers upon them innate superiority and preponderant rights over the inferior Arabs; (3) the claim that Israel has no responsibility for Arabs who have chosen to flee from Israeli territory and whose lands and property have been taken over by Israel or by Israeli citizens; (4) the belief that "strategic" boundaries and military strength can provide to a nation of less than 3 million people, confronted by 20 times that many adversaries, more permanent security than could an agreed settlement and international guarantees; (5) the belief that massive retaliation against Arab villages for terrorist raids into Israel will check those raids and promote Israeli security; (6) the belief that there will be substantial further Jewish immigration into Israel, which will justify occupying additional territory.

"The principal myths on the Arab side are (1) the belief that places holy to Muslims must be under exclusive Arab administration, regardless of whether or not they are also holy to Jews and Christians; (2) the claim that Israel is illegitimate and must be destroyed; (3) the claim that, after defeat in three wars, Arab dignity and manhood can be restored only by more bloodshed and by eventual military victory; (4) the illusion that this victory can be achieved by acquiring sophisticated arms which their technically untrained populations are unable to use effectively; (5) the claim that all Palestinians who have fled from Israel and all their descendants have the right to return to Israel and to recover the properties they lost; (6) the claim that, until this right is recognized and enforced, Palestinians are justified in carrying out acts of terrorism against innocent Israelis, and that such acts of terrorism will shake Israeli resolution and strengthen the Arab cause."

- CHARLES YOST

"The Myths That Block Peace"  
pp. 83-84, The Atlantic

The absence of all myths and dreams of the future is pessimism. The pessimistic outlook toward the future has infected many people in our time. This is the person who disposes of local currency in order to hoard gold. He has hoarded against the economic future of his society and in fact his act will usually help to realize what he dreaded. He has removed economic capability from the present which could have been invested in industry and economic growth in favor of gold which is static and the classic symbol of fear in face of the future.

How do you honestly feel about the future? I meet a lot of pessimists every day who are hedging against the future by every means they can afford.

As for the Christian, across the path of the future stands Jesus Christ, the Lord of history. Therefore, we must defy our fears and wager with all of our energy upon the task that is set before us in the present. We are not afraid of the future because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow -- and the future is in his hand.

On this sort of note, Paul concludes his letter to the Christians at Rome.

These are people who he addressed with blunt disregard for their feelings when he told them of the judgment of God upon all that is unreal and sinful. But, to these same people he shared the gospel that had been given to him in Jesus Christ, the new Adam who knows us and has identified with our lives and has redeemed us. Paul told of the painful experience of his battle with his own personal weakness and the hope that came out of that battle in his discovery that God's grace is able to sustain us in our discipleship. He told them about history, the holy history of Israel and of the New Israel, the church. He called every man to follow Christ realistically and genuinely and he challenged the Christian to live out the implications of God's love. His words still ring true today.