

Reformation
& Revival



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Many years ago in China a student approached the missionary he had just heard preaching the Gospel and asked, “Do I understand you correctly, Sir?”

“What do you mean?” asked the missionary.

“Here in China,” said the student, “we have a hard time getting people to do what they ought to do. If I understand you correctly, the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes people want to do what they ought to do. Is that right?”

In those few words the Chinese student pointed up the folly of legalism and revealed the heart of Christian ethics. Legalism is not the road to ethical living as some teach. It did not work for the children of Israel and it doesn't work for Christians. Under the ethics of the old Law covenant God commanded obedience to His laws with strong threats of punishment (including the death penalty) for disobedience. That is why, in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul called the law “the ministry of death” and “the ministry of condemnation” whose glory was not to be compared to the glory of “the ministry of righteousness” in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Great Motivator

Israel failed miserably to comply with the Law covenant because the biblical ethic was not merely an external obedience; it had to come from an inner moral force that only God could provide. God provided this inner morality in the new covenant of the Gospel of His redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. Under the ethics of that new covenant God sends His Spirit to indwell the believer so that he is enabled to obey the Lord, not by compulsion, but by impulsion. The mature believer does not see Christian ethics as a system of abstinences, but as a positive godliness that emanates from his regenerated spirit. By using the new birth to implant a new life principle within us, the Holy Spirit gives us the desire and the ability to believe in Jesus Christ for

salvation and to repent of our sins.

That act of regeneration also plants the seed of love for God and our neighbors. That love is the great motivator behind the Christian ethic. “If you love Me,” said Christ, “you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). The clear implication in these words is that a genuine love for the Lord Jesus Christ includes a sincere desire to keep His commandments.

Christ’s major contribution to Christian ethics was His love for sinners as demonstrated in His willingness to die for them that they might have a new life of obedience to God. That is what the Christian religion is all about. The Bible clearly shows that one’s religion determines his ethics because, as John Murray wrote in his *Principles of Conduct*, “Ethics is grounded in and is the fruit of the fear of the Lord. . . . What or whom we worship determines our behavior” (p. 231).

A Serious Dichotomy

There are Christians, some of whom are in the ministry, who have neglected this relationship of love and worship and ethics. Consequently they have missed the vital connection between ethics and their influence upon others. For example, in a conversation I had with a young Christian handyman, he said, “I would much rather work for unbelievers than for Christians.” When I asked him why, he told me of two successful Christian business owners and a well-paid pastor in his church who refused to pay the fair amount he requested for renovations he had done for them in their homes. “They demanded that I give them a large discount I could not afford,” he said, “just because we went to the same church.”

Knowing that such selfish Christians exist in many churches compels us to ask how born-again Christians can be so bereft of love and ethics. Perhaps it is because some

pastors regularly discount the importance of secular work in their attempts to exalt the ministry. As a result, Christians perceive a serious dichotomy between secular work and Christian service. Some view their own work as unimportant—something to endure because they have to make a living.

Such fail to see that they should do all their work “as unto the Lord.” As John Newton once said, “A Christian should never plead spirituality for being a sloven; if he be but a shoe cleaner, he should be the best in the parish.”

In his advice to believers about Christian ethics in Colossians 3:22-24, Paul pointed up the importance of love motivation when he said that obedience was to be exercised,

not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. To work “heartily, as for the Lord” means to work with a heart filled with love for Christ.

Unbelievers More Ethical Than Christians?

After reading Paul’s words, one wonders why some Christians are lazy. Because such were engaged in nonproductive activities that do not glorify God or render good to anyone, Paul said, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). This exhortation applies to lazy church leaders as well because their laziness tends to influence others to follow suit. The church of Christ should not tolerate a lazy minister. It is a divine rule that the believers God calls into His service have an industrious nature.

One of the big dangers in the sin of idleness is that it nearly always rides tandem with the sins of meddling and gossip, the favorite sins of many Christians! According to

Paul, the cure for lazy, gossipy meddlers is silence, hard work, and minding their own business.

Although not lazy, some Christians are very stingy. A Christian clerk told me that the successful Christian merchant he worked for paid the Christians on his staff such small wages that they could hardly believe he was a Christian in good standing at his church. Apparently he had allowed his love for money to shrink his love for Christ and fellow believers. He actually believed there was nothing wrong in paying unbelievers more than he paid his Christian employees. Said the clerk, "We feel that he is taking advantage of us because we are Christians."

Some Christians, who are neither lazy nor stingy, are unethical because they hate paying taxes. A business owner who professed faith in Christ told me that he did not charge or pay sales tax on many of his sales. "If I were to charge and pay those taxes," he said, "I would lose my best customers and be forced to close my business." It didn't seem to bother his conscience that he and his customers had established a conspiracy to break the law!

Christians who act like that are doing great damage to the people of God because some believers, like the young handyman mentioned above, are getting the idea that people outside the church are more ethical than Christians. What incompatibility there is between the willing violation of Christian ethics and a profession of faith in and love for Jesus Christ!

Why Christians Do Not Succeed

How is it that Christians allow themselves to adopt unethical practices? Some no doubt have such a desire for success, profit, position and acclaim in the world that they must fulfill that desire at any cost. Christians who practice unethical methods have lost sight of the shortness of life and the temporary nature of what this world has to offer.

They have made the foolish mistake of perceiving temporal wealth, power and popularity on earth as having more value than everlasting treasures in heaven.

Failure is built into any activity that violates Christian ethics and employs dishonest methods to make money. Having seen several Christians fail in business because of unethical dealings, I believe God will not allow dishonest Christians to succeed indefinitely. In the very nature of the case, the disciple of Christ cannot long enjoy ill-gotten gains. God takes a personal interest in what His children do whether it be right or wrong. It pays to remember that God can rearrange circumstances in such a way that a Christian's wealth, power and popularity acquired by unethical methods can vanish overnight.

Unethical Christians cannot engage in exploitation of others without making enemies. Some have discovered this to their sorrow. A people exploited for profit sometimes become a people exploded for revenge. Christians have no right to be associated with the exploitation of others for profit. It is one thing to suffer opposition as a Christian defending the Gospel of Christ. It is quite another to suffer opposition as a wrongdoer in the exercise of commercial exploitation.

Although they would not exploit others or oppress the poor for gain, some Christians seem to be more at home with the moneyed people who do than they are with believers. That identification makes them unwitting fellow transgressors in the sin of oppression. The Lord promises poverty for those who oppress the poor and those who toady to them. God's Word says, "He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty" (Prov. 22:16).

According to the Bible, the dishonest Christian will suffer, not only poverty, but loneliness and folly. These await him because he makes his profits by unjust means. How

sad it is to hear a prosperous Christian bragging about the great “business deals” he has clinched by his unethical cleverness! It is obvious that there is no genuine success for the man who refuses to practice Christian ethics in his business. This is true because he follows a path that is diametrically opposed to God’s directions for the Christian life.

When a Profession of Faith Is Suspect

You cannot judge a man’s relationship to Jesus Christ merely by his profession of faith. You have to know something about his ethics; namely, his conduct or manner of life. According to God’s Word, those who truly know and love the Lord desire and strive to do what is right and to help those in need. The Christian life that lacks these is incompatible with a profession of faith.

Determined to make a profit, some Christians are prone to cut corners with the idea that such little things really don’t matter. But faithfulness in small things does matter because it is one of the marks of a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ. In fact, the man who cannot be trusted with the little things has no right to be a leader in business, in government, or in any other responsible sphere of human activity. “He who is faithful in a very little thing,” said Jesus, “is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10).

If we do not want our profession of faith in Christ to be suspect, we must love Christ, obey Him, and deal with others in an impartial and fair-minded way. Anything else is dishonesty which has no place in the life of the man who professes to be a disciple of Him who said, “I am the truth.” When we are not fair with others, we employ a false balance in the same manner as a dishonest merchant who makes extra money by doctoring his scales. “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord,” said Solomon, “but a just weight is His delight” (Prov. 11:1).

The unethical practice of injustice is the result of turning one’s back on the Word of God, leaving one’s first love, deliberately disobeying Christ’s commandments, and refusing to “pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Peter said the way to make one’s calling and election sure was to add these seven character-building traits to his faith: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity. Where these are lacking there is a strong possibility that a profession of faith is suspect.

Miseries in Store

Some Christians refuse to believe that the Bible promises chastisement for those who do not strive to live in obedience to their Lord. But their unbelief will not cancel the truth of divine discipline. “For he who does wrong,” said Paul, “will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality” (Col. 3:25).

When a wealthy man who takes advantage of others for personal gain revels in the luxury of his riches, he is not thinking of the misery that God has in store for him. The Bible speaks harshly to those who exploit others for gain, and the Lord does not confine His harsh words to the Old Testament. In chapter five of his epistle, James wrote that rich men who treated their laborers unfairly and hold back their rightful wages would one day weep and howl because of the miseries God has planned for them.

Every time I read James 5 I think of a business owner I once knew. Although popular as an officer in his church, he became engaged in defrauding fellow Christians to make money. He lived for a while in the luxury of his embezzled funds, but one day the misery promised by the Lord caught up to him. Exposed publicly as a criminal, he lost everything—his money, his family, his good name, and his testimony.

The Christian who is guilty of exploiting others to make money for himself must be warned of the danger in which he has placed himself. He may not give a second thought to the victims of his unfair practices, but he can be absolutely sure that God thinks about them. In any confrontation between him and his victims, God will stand on their side, not his. "For the Lord will plead their case, and take the life of those who rob them" (Prov. 22:23).

The only way we can save ourselves from this kind of judgment is to follow Job's example and make sure we exercise impartiality in all our relationships. Having been blessed with great riches, Job knew that they had come from God and that God expected him to be a good steward or manager of those riches. Job was so sure of his impartiality with all persons, so certain of his fair-mindedness and kindness toward them, that he challenged his peers to examine his life to see if he had ever acted unjustly toward anyone. If he had, he said, "Then let my shoulder fall from the socket, and my arm be broken off at the elbow" (Job 31:22). If Job could live like that with his limited knowledge of God, how much more should we comply with the Christian ethics of the new covenant of grace!

Every Christian should beware of the ease by which one can become guilty of violating biblical ethics. He should pray that God the Holy Spirit will impel him to practice equity because, without it, he cannot truly succeed, his profession of faith is suspect, and he will learn by personal experience what miseries God has in store for him. "For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl. 12:14).

The Risks in Material Prosperity

Blessed with a measure of wealth, some Christians feel they have a special dispensation to sin with impunity. Consequently they do not concern themselves with what

the Bible says about God's judgment of His own people. They have allowed their prosperity to give them a wrong concept of God's character. They play up His qualities of love, kindness, grace and mercy while they play down His qualities of power, wisdom, justice, righteousness, holiness and wrath.

This wrong concept of God among prosperous Christians has come about, I believe, because so many men and women are satisfied with a divided Christ. They accept Christ as their Priest or Savior to escape divine punishment, but not as their Prophet with a message they should heed, or as their King to whom they owe allegiance. This gives them a distorted view of what it means to be a disciple. They have no desire to deny themselves, bear the cross of identification with Christ's sufferings, or to follow Him wherever He leads.

Some modern evangelists have a tendency to promote the Gospel as the solution to domestic, social and vocational problems. This kind of evangelism fails to disclose the nature of man's sinfulness before God. The design of the Gospel of Christ, however, is first, to make men conscious of their guilt of committing sins that are offensive to God. An evangelism that says little or nothing about the justice and holiness and wrath of God cannot do this. Without a deep conviction of sin, one cannot appreciate the riches of God's redemptive love in Christ. Neither can he possess a love for Christ and others as the great motivator behind Christian ethics.

So far as I can judge, Jesus Christ never offered the gift of salvation by grace to those who were set in their rebellion against God's principles for acceptable behavior. A prime example of this is His encounter with the rich young ruler. Asked to give his possessions to the poor as proof that his request for eternal life was sincere, the young man turned his back on the Lord. His obvious love for transito-

ry riches was greater than his professed desire for eternal life. Knowing that the rich young man was unwilling to recognize the offensiveness of his sin and guilt before God, Jesus knew that the offer of forgiveness and love would mean nothing to him. It was right after this encounter with the rich young man that Jesus warned His audience of one of the dangers that attends the possession of wealth. “How hard it is for those who are wealthy,” He said, “to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24)!

Busy with the material things of this world a Christian can forget that God is a God of justice who does not overlook sinful rebellion against Him. Having redeemed all Christians by the penal sacrifice of His only begotten Son and given them a new life, God expects them to love Him and manifest progressive holiness in their lives. Moses warned the Israelites that if they misused the wealth they were to receive in the promised land they would “surely perish quickly from the land” (Deut. 4:26).

As believers in Christ we should have a strong desire to be right in our relationship to God, not only in times of adversity, but in prosperous days as well. We can avoid a wrong attitude toward God and learn to live a more balanced, ethical Christian life by taking heed to the risks in material prosperity.

The Risk of Family Indulgence. Some Christians are so desirous to give their children “the things we never had” that they neglect their children’s moral and spiritual welfare to make the money to pay for those things. Unless parents are watchful they will find there is no end to the list of things that children desire and often demand from prosperous parents. Because of this, parents must not allow those demands to obstruct the culture of their own souls and the spiritual and moral edification of their children. The Bible teaches that disciples of Jesus Christ have no right to put their family members before the Lord. “He who loves father

or mother more than Me,” said Jesus, “is not worthy of Me, and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37).

Some Christian parents allow their wayward children to embarrass them into a state of spiritual lethargy. In their family discussions they deliberately leave out the things of God for fear of offending the unbelieving members of the family. Striving to keep peace in the family, some parents avoid the mention of the great biblical standards by which all men are to measure their conduct.

It seems to be a very difficult lesson for parents to learn—that God’s way is always the most profitable way. Many seem to have a natural penchant for answering God’s direct commandments to them by saying, “Yes, but. . .,” and then putting forth some of their own opinions colored by their personal desires. A Christian parent, for example, might try to justify his daughter’s affair with a married man by saying, “It’s not as bad as taking drugs or getting involved in a lesbian relationship.”

That kind of thinking has taken over the minds of many Christian parents. Instead of using the Word of God and its ethical standards by which to check the moral value of an activity, they set up their own system for grading sins. That is a wrong and dangerous kind of indulgence in family situations.

Prosperous Christian parents must not use their ready access to money to indulge their children or themselves. The Lord gives man the power to get wealth that he might use his wealth to glorify God. Wealthy Christians have an ethical responsibility to use their excess money to support the Lord’s work.

The Risk of Exalting Self Above God. To own property is the right of any man as long as he obtains his property in an honest and fair way. The Word of God does not condemn the ownership of wealth, but it does condemn the misuse

of wealth. One risks the corrupting sin of self-exaltation when he becomes proud of his possessions. Moses told the children of Israel that material wealth contained the risk of forgetting God and corrupting themselves.

We Christians should always view our possessions as blessings from the Lord, and not as something we deserve. It requires wisdom to know how to live with prosperity; otherwise its misuse will ruin the one who possesses it. "The prosperity of fools," said wise King Solomon, "shall destroy them" (Prov. 1:32, KJV).

The Risk of Spiritual Indifference. Some Christians allow themselves to grow spiritually cold because of their unethical interest in material things. Most Christians do not believe that prosperity can lead them to become idolaters. But it can and does until, in some of them, there is little or no desire to worship God in spirit and in truth. They seem oblivious to the truth that covetousness is idolatry, and to turn away from God for material gain is to place oneself on a disaster route!

Moses warned God's people about the danger of going so far that they would "do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke Him to anger" (Deut. 4:25). Anyone with even a small sense of observation can see the dangers in a prosperous way of life. But some of God's people close their eyes to the evidence all around them and blindly walk into sinful habits made attractive by their financial ability to indulge themselves.

The Bible teaches that sin of any kind is a retrograde power. Persisting in a life of spiritual indifference, the prosperous believer turns from the living God to take up with the dead idols of sinful pursuits. He has left the God who hears and answers prayer to fraternize with the dear icons of worldly pleasures. Turning from the all-seeing, eternal God, he has put his trust in the blind images of temporary materialism. How this should challenge us to trust in God

alone! And to avoid at all costs the risk of so misusing God's material and financial blessings that we become spiritually indifferent!

Whether one is a Christian wage earner, a Christian employer, a church pastor, a Christian writer, an educator, a missionary, or a prosperous Christian, his love for Jesus Christ and the Word of God should motivate him to adopt and practice Christian ethics. To encourage us all to be more God glorifying in everything we do, here are a few lines from a beautiful hymn by Charles Wesley:

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go,
My daily labor to pursue,
Thee, only Thee, resolved to know
In all I think, or speak or do.
The task Thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfill,
In all my works Thy presence find
And prove Thy good and perfect will.
Thee may I set at my right hand,
Whose eyes my inmost substance see,
And labor on at Thy command
And offer all my works to Thee.

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