

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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Chapter 20 -

THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC

Romans 12:1-8

Having presented the doctrinal basis of Christian faith in the first 11 chapters of Romans, Paul now turns to the Christian's responsibility in the light of the truth he has set forth. This pattern is typical of Paul's epistles: doctrine first, then ethics; what man is to believe about GOD, then what duty GOD requires of those who believe.

Doctrine was basic but Paul expected belief to issue in goodness. Indeed, this is the very nature of Christian truth, the essence of Christian doctrine, "truth is in order to goodness." Doctrine which does not issue in life is sub-Christian; it is not doctrine as the Apostle Paul understood it, which suggests that there was no controversy between Paul and James. When James wrote "**Faith without works is dead,**" he was agreeing with Paul who believed doctrine ought to issue in life.

To illustrate: you will recall the closing verses of the 5th chapter, "**the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by JESUS Christ our Lord.**" That is to say, the truth about grace is that it produces righteousness. Or he puts it this way, "**I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of GOD unto salvation to everyone that believed.**" Why is it the power of GOD unto salvation? "**For therein (that is, in the Gospel) is the righteousness of God is revealed.**"

In other words, it is the Gospel which produces righteousness in the believer! This is the heart of Christian doctrine, you see, that GOD has acted in history, and Christian ethics is the result of man's response to GOD's action in history. GOD works, man responds - this is the Christian life. Christian ethics is not what man does for GOD, himself or others, but what man lets GOD do in and through him to His own glory. *Christian ethics is the work of GOD in the believer!*

Paul expresses it this way in another context, II Corinthians 9:8, "**And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.**" Grace abounding, good works abounding; it is abounding grace which abounds to good works. The only work that pleases GOD in the believer is the work that He initiates in the believer. Good deeds that we initiate for GOD are not Christian ethics. Good

deeds that we initiate for our fellow man are not Christian ethics. *Christian ethics are the result of the grace of GOD operating in the life of the yielded believer, a fact we shall understand more thoroughly with Paul's very first ethical admonition, which is the foundation and the fountainhead of all Christian ethics.*

Before we see this, let us take one other look at the matter of ethics. We have been discussing the sovereignty of GOD with the related truths, election and/or predestination. Will you observe, please, that whenever the word "election" or "chosen" or "predestined" or "ordained" is used, it is never an end in itself but always as a means to an end; it is always qualified in the Word of GOD.

For example, Ephesians 1:4, **"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world. . ."** But there is no period there, yet so often in our thinking we put a period there when we talk about being chosen of GOD. **"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."** Chosen to be holy and blameless in love! To be chosen of GOD means to be holy and blameless in love, the fruit of the choosing of GOD in the life.

Or Ephesians 2:10, **"For we are his workmanship, created in CHRIST JESUS unto good works. . ."** **"Created"**! Only GOD can create. Man can invent, man can discover, but only GOD can create; that word is reserved for GOD alone. We are **"His workmanship"** (that is, GOD's workmanship) **"created,"** which only GOD can do, **"in Christ JESUS unto good works."** **"Created... unto good works, which God hath before ordained, that we should walk in them."** **"Created unto good works,"** ordained by GOD to walk in good works. Romans 8:29, **"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate,"** but there is no period there. **"Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son . . ."** Predestination is unto conformation to the image of JESUS CHRIST. These things all apply to those that are **"in Christ,"** not to those that are not yet saved!

Election is not unto privilege but unto responsibility. We are not predestinated unto a status, but unto service. We are not saved just to be made safe; we are saved in order to serve; and Christianity which is preoccupied with its own personal safety is an aberration of legitimate and authentic Christianity. It is the caricature of a true Christian.

There is a sense in which the saved person, the authentically saved person, is preoccupied with the will of GOD, absorbed in the will of GOD; he then completely is possessed by the will of GOD. His own welfare is really quite secondary. Moses wished that his name might be blotted out of the Book of Life for the sake of his people Israel. How different are Moses and Paul from the person who is so busily preoccupied about his own eternal safety that the welfare and salvation of others, and the commission of the Lord, are secondary if they have any place at all in his life. The very word 'redemption' implies "purchased for a use," purchased for a purpose. We have been redeemed; we have been bought by JESUS CHRIST in order to be used by Him for His purposes in the world.

Therefore, Christian ethics, rightly understood, flow out of the work of GOD in the life of a believer. It is what GOD does for us, and in us, and to us, and through us. Remember JESUS' word in the Sermon on the Mount. **"Let"** (not 'make', as though you could do anything about it,

as though you could generate it); "Let" (allow, permit, consent) **"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and. . ."** And what? And say, "My, isn't he a wonderful Christian?" never! **"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven."**

Why will they glorify your Father which is in heaven? Because the good works are the works of the Father. Man cannot be given any credit for them. For this reason Paul's instruction to the ethical portion of Romans begins with that remarkable verse at the end of the 11th chapter, the 36th verse, **"For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen. I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of GOD, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice . . ."** All things are "of Him," all things are "through Him," all things are "to Him," to Him belongs the **"glory for ever. Amen. I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of GOD . . ."**

The first thing to see about Christian ethics is that they begin with dedication to CHRIST. This is not the ultimate, this is the beginning of Christian ethics. **"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of GOD, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service, and be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God,"** that is, that you may demonstrate the will of GOD, that it is **"good, and acceptable, and perfect."** Paul is going to talk about all these things that are good and acceptable and perfect with GOD in the rest of the epistle.

The first two verses in Romans 12 are basic to everything that follows in this chapter as well as chapters 13, 14, and 15; what follows in these chapters then, is that which is **"good, and acceptable, and perfect"** with GOD. Now presenting one's body a **"living sacrifice"** and being **"not conformed to this world"** but being **"transformed by the renewing of your mind"** is the foundation and fountainhead of Christian ethics. ***Until you have responded to the love of GOD in JESUS CHRIST in this way, nothing else you do is significant; GOD does not even see it.***

Christian ethics begins with dedication to GOD, JESUS did say love your neighbor, and He did say love your enemy, and He did say a lot of other things, but the first thing He said is, **"Thou shalt love the Lord thy GOD with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment."** You may be an ethical man and ignore this commandment and there? by be guilty of the greatest sin, for this is the greatest commandment.

As a matter of fact, there are those who travel in Russia who say there is a kind of moral Puritanism in Russia - for quite another reason, to be sure - but the point is, even atheists can be ethical if it pays. Paul is discussing something infinitely more than just human goodness, man-made ethics; he is talking about the very nature of GOD as it is expressed in the life of the believer.

Some years ago at a church conference, I closed a series of messages by speaking on this theme: your body is the temple of GOD; He desires to dwell in it, possess it, and use it for His purposes in the world. When I had finished, because it was the closing of the weekend conference, I invited any to stand who wished to present their bodies as living sacrifices unto the Lord.

The first person to rise quickly to her feet was a very lovely elderly woman. Another older woman, then an older man, after which many others rose. I was curious because I had been impressed with this lady who was lovely and unusually gracious; so as soon as possible I made my way to her and asked, "Do you mind telling me why you so quickly stood to your feet this evening when I gave that invitation?"

Her answer was this, "I am eighty-eight years old, and I have been a church member all my life, but I never knew until tonight that GOD wanted my body, and I stood quickly because I don't have very much time left!" Is it possible for us to be nice, respectable people and never present our bodies to GOD as a living sacrifice? ***But if we have not done that, we have not even begun to live the Christian life GOD's way!*** Have you presented your body a living sacrifice to JESUS CHRIST? Have you? You will know if you have; this is as definite as responding to any other kind of invitation. Have you? If you are not sure, you probably have not. This has nothing to do with being a good person. Of course you are good; a bad person would not be interested in this book. Have you presented your body a living sacrifice?

Now notice that first it is dedication; it is making a sacrifice; that is the reason why it is so thrilling when young people do it, because they have a lot of life left to be used to the glory of GOD. It is never too late to do this, for a lady eighty-eight years old can. It is never too soon to do it, so that all of your life can be possessed and used by JESUS CHRIST to do His will in the world. Present your body a living sacrifice; this is holy and acceptable unto GOD; this is your reasonable service. I asked a group of junior high young people what they thought "reasonable" meant. You know their answer? They said, "It would be unreasonable to do any less than that!" It is! It is irrational not to present your body a living sacrifice to GOD.

Then Paul continues, "**be not conformed to this world.**" It sounds very innocent, but if you are trying to keep up with the Joneses you are failing in Christian ethics because a Christian does not try to keep up with the Joneses. He does not try to keep up with anybody else; he lets CHRIST conform him to His own image. This is basically internal, but it expresses itself externally. Let your mind be transformed by renewing, by a renewing process; allow CHRIST to mold your thoughts.

Instead of being motivated the way the world is motivated let yourself be motivated by the will of GOD so that you begin to see things with CHRIST's eyes, from CHRIST's point of view. You look at things CHRIST's way, you think things CHRIST's way, you have what Paul calls "**the mind of Christ.**" You actually see life the way JESUS sees life! This is to have one's mind transformed. This will result if you refuse to allow the world to conform you to its mold. "Everybody is doing it, therefore I must!" This is being conformed to this world.

John in his first epistle defines worldliness as "**the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.**" Motivated by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life is being conformed to this world. Let the SPIRIT of GOD transform your mind until you have the mind of CHRIST.

Paul discusses discipleship in the next verse, 3 through 8, and it is significant that he begins with self-evaluation. "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God

hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." Do not think too highly of yourself, Paul says, that is conceit; but do not think too little of yourself; that is also conceit, inverted pride, which is the worst kind. Christians do not crawl because GOD has given to each one a measure of faith. Then he goes into the beautiful diversity in the body of CHRIST, "**as we have many members in one body... so we, being many, are one body**"; and every member - every member - has a responsibility, a place in the body and its functions.

He amplifies this in the 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians where he points out that the eye cannot say to the ear, "I have no need of you," nor can the ear say to the eye, "You do not need me." Not only is it wrong for someone in the Church to say, "I do not need any? body else"; it is wrong for someone in the Church to say, "Nobody else needs me." We desperately need each other as members of a body; we belong together, each is important to all, and all are important to each. For this reason Paul admonishes us to evaluate ourselves in terms of the measure of grace that GOD has given, for GOD has given each a call; let each obey that call to His glory.

Wherever you are that is GOD's call for you; and if it is not, you ought to be some other place. But the way to know whether or not you are where you ought to be is to assume that you are where GOD has called you and to conduct yourself there as though it is GOD's will; and if it is not, He will soon redirect you. How we need to recapture this understanding from the Word of GOD, that in the New Testament there is no basic distinction between the clergy and the laity! The word "clergy" actually applies to all Christians, and the word "laity" applies to all Christians; the clergyman, the preacher, is as much a layman as any man in the pew, and any man in the pew is as much a clergyman - that is, he bears responsibility for the ministry of CHRIST just as the man in the pulpit.

This is clear in the New Testament, and this dichotomy between laymen and clergy, between the pulpit and the pew, is a tragic distinction which has led to much of the impotence as well as the corruption in the Church of JESUS CHRIST! When the clergy becomes a class by itself, assumed to be better than the man in the pew, it becomes very easy for the clergy to come between the man in the pew and GOD; and this JESUS CHRIST never intended. The work of the ministry belongs to every man and woman in the Body; it belongs to every believer - this is the graphic picture Paul gives.

He closes the chapter with general exhortations that are quite explicit and without ambiguity. The difficulty with these ethical portions in the Word of GOD is not that they are hard to understand, but they are so terribly plain; and one of the little tricks the conscience sometimes plays to justify disobedience of plain truth in the Bible is to encourage us to become deeply preoccupied with "mysteries." Obviously you do not have to do that which you cannot understand. But there is enough that is plain in the Word of GOD about which we ought to be busy.

Incidentally, one of the keys to understanding the profound things of the Word is to obey the plain things. In your leisure read these clear admonitions, beginning at the 9th verse through the 21st verses of Romans, chapter 12: unhypocritical love, respect for one another, preferring one another, honoring one another above self, being honest and loving in all of one's affairs and so on. These are plain, and they do not require any interpretation from preacher or teacher. Basic to all understanding and living of the Christian life is the realization that one has not begun to live

the Christian life authentically until he has presented his body a living sacrifice to CHRIST.
Have you done this?

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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