

Interim Ministry Resources

Chapter 13 Identity

An Ethic to Live By (12)

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AN ETHIC TO LIVE BY

by

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This assignment has given me an opportunity to come to grips with an ethic to live by. It will be by no means the final answer in a neatly spelled out system of Christian ethics. Rather my intention is to articulate the formative factors which go into making a Christian ethic to live by. Hopefully this will be a basis on which I can continue to build and grow and to spell out more clearly in the time to come. In making this an ethic to live by, I have in mind my life as a Christian here on this earth and my work as a pastor in the Lutheran church. The ethic should be able to speak to me in both ways. In concluding this introductory statement I must say that this paper is divided into three main sections. The first is by far the largest. This focuses on the Great Commandment by Jesus. As a part of this I will spell out relationship as the key, the place of the law now, and the place of justice. In the last two much smaller sections I will talk about implications for ministry and give a case study,

I. The Great Commandment

In response to a question of that day, Jesus gave the first and great commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22:37-40)

These twin commandments are the starting point for this ethic

that I am proposing. William K. Frankena has called the ethics, that has taken the basic imperative to be that of love, agapism. He goes on to give his critique of how this agapism has been variously translated into ethics. In addition, he tells how a modified agapism can work.¹ He stands as one philosopher who is willing to take a look at the possible validity of this theological ethic for the field of philosophy. While my specific concern is to look at ethics for the Christian living in this world, I think it is healthy to keep his critique in mind as I go about this task. I agree with Frankena that pure agapism has its problems. As a mine result will be more of a modified approach.

What is the basis for this commandment? Certainly it could be said that Jesus was a great teacher who understood the central point of the law and the prophets, and who gave this commandment as the basis for living life. But Jesus was more than just a great teacher. The New Testament witnesses to the fact that in Jesus Christ God was at work to overcome the estrangement between himself and all of humankind. In the cross and resurrection God acted to put to death the force and consequences of that estrangement and to raise to new life the one who took upon himself the sin of the world. The one who was rejected by the world was taken by God into full communion with himself. This one, Jesus Christ, now lives to call us into communion and fellowship with God and to claim us as God's own. This one who died and was raised is the same one who gave the great commandment. He gives this, not as some harsh demand for us to live up to, but as a friendly

command . At the same time as he gives this command , the Holy Spirit , in making Jesus Christ present , empowers us to live in this relationship with God and with the neighbor . If Jesus were only a teacher , this commandment would be a high ideal to try to measure up to .

But because he is more than that , he gives the commandment as a description of the relationship he desires for us . In Long's system of classification this ethic uses the relational motif .

"The direction of action is shaped by the sense of excitement or gratitude which arises from a live , dynamic , and compelling encounter with the source of moral guidance ." ² This relational motif can be further discussed in terms of relationship to God , relationship to the neighbor , and relationship to the self .

In the relationship to God matter , it seems that the best way to get at the central point is to start out by looking at Anders Nygren 's , Agape and Eros . Eros is human 's seeking and acquisitive love in order to climb the ladder to God . In contrast to this , agape is God 's sacrificial and giving love in coming down to human-kind . This list could be extended much longer as it is in his book . Suffice it to say that the contrast is exemplified best in the difference between Adam and Eve submitting to the temptation to be like a god and that of Christ giving himself for all by going to his death on the cross . Ernest Becker , in his two books : Denial of Death and Escape from Evil , has shown in quite a sophisticated manner how all of life is comprised of one , big attempt to deny immortality and to erect security structures . , *I* Into this world of people trying to be as god > , God comes in the

person of Jesus Christ. God demonstrates the depth of his love for the world by taking such drastic measures as this. God loves with an agape love, while the old humanity loves with an eros love.

What is the appropriate response to this divine initiative, then? First of all, it must be reiterated that God at the same time calls forth and forms the response. Luther speaks in the explanation of the third article that the Holy Spirit brings about the gift of faith. Beyond this it must be said that the commandment itself gives some idea of the response desired. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart; and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Two things can be said by way of comment. This is a trust and an obedience with the whole being. The heart, soul, and mind was his way of saying the 'entire person. Secondly,, the response is one of responsibility. As a part of this it can be said that the life in Christ is a life to be lived with creativity and imagination in response to God's love in Jesus Christ. All in all this response cannot be one of agape, realistically speaking. For even the love of the new Adam is fractured and imperfect. Nevertheless, it is a love of God from the whole person made possible by the Holy Spirit making^{present} the work of God in Jesus Christ.

The second commandment goes as follows: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This takes us into the second area of the relationship to the neighbor. The relationship between that of to God and to the neighbor is best summed up in the title of the book which treats Luther's ethic, "Faith Active in Love."³ He shows how Luther believed that love for the neighbor spontaneously

flows out of the faith relationship. This is not something which is forced out of a person, but that which is evoked by the working of the Holy Spirit, How is faith in God made manifest, then? It is demonstrated by love for the neighbor, not in order to prove one's faith, but because of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Even as Christ lived and died for others, so the Christian is a person living for others. This corresponds to the Hebrew stress on the neighbor as demonstrated in the commandments. The community was important to the Jewish people. Inherent in the community was the central concern for the neighbor. In this Judeo-Christian ethic the believer is the channel of God's love for others in this world.

The above attempts to account for the relationship which gives impetus to the Christian's concern for the neighbor. Next, the question must be asked of "What is the form of this Christian concern?" Here I have to think that Nels Ferre is on the right track. I agree with him that true agape love is only capable of

To be realistic we must say that humanity is not capable of this totally self-giving love, Those who say they are are only kidding themselves and most likely playing the part of a martyr. At the same time I cannot completely agree with Ferre with his recommendation that we have a balance between eros and agape. We do need to speak of Christian love as different than agape and different from eros, but that does not mean we need to speak of it as being in the middle. At the risk of splitting hairs, I must say that a new kind of love is created in the faith relationship. Here I agree with him that this could be a *philia* or covenant love.⁴

This more practical way of looking at relationships is similar to that of the great American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan¹ "When the satisfaction or the security of another person becomes as significant to one as is one's own satisfaction or security, then the state of love exists."⁵ I say similar because this definition is of course not distinctively Christian. For me, to be distinctively Christian it would be a love for self with the love with which Christ first loved us. This is a totally new and different kind of love than the eros Nygren speaks about in quoting the Greeks. I will go into more detail later on this. The important thing in bringing up Stack's definition is that he chastens the Christian thinking which calls for a totally agape love, a thinking which has made I Cor. 13 a kind of prescriptive guide to life. What is similar to Ferre in Stack is the covenant aspect. Both to give and to receive is part of the relationship. The Christian uniqueness comes in being able to risk and be vulnerable because of the empowering love of Jesus Christ ^{who} gave his life on our behalf.

The relationship to self has been touched on above and deserves ' to be spelled out more here. The commandment says to "Love your neighbor as yourself." What does this mean? Luther opposed a love of the self. He primarily ought of love of self as eros which was acquisitive and self-seeking. For Luther true love for the neighbor comes only in forgetting oneself and concentrating on the neighbor. He spoke in opposition to the ordered love in which the neighbor was loved for the higher ⁶ I do not propose to go back to the good

ordered love. But I do think that there is justification for

speaking of a love for the self. We are claimed as one of God's own and are accepted as one of his people. Should we not show the same love and acceptance for ourselves that God has shown to us? It seems that we do God no favor in denigrating his creative/redemptive work, (sinner/saints), in order to appreciate his work of redemption. It seems to me that the commandment could best be understood by saying, "Love your neighbor at the same as you love yourself," "love yourself," For it is questionable whether one can really love another if there is no respect for oneself, In addition those- it is difficult to love who cannot accept themselves, The important point to emphasize in all of this is that, even as we love others with the love Christ loves us, so also we love ourselves with the love Christ loves us. This finishes my treatment of relationship as the key and leaves a discussion of the place of ten commandments and of justice still to come.

A background on the historical use of the ten commandments will help to give a perspective on what place they should be given today. In the history of Israel God gave the commandments as a guide to the people. It was a gift given in mercy. These commandments were meant to be words of freedom in which the boundaries of the relationship between God and his people were outlined, they were meant to help define the relationship. Later on in the history of the people they began to become very prescriptive. It was in this context that the apostle Paul wrote that the law has become an accuser which convicts people of sin. The law shows where all have gone wrong and need the saving grace of the gospel.

What is the place of the law today? On the one hand I want to say that the Holy Spirit is our guide in life who works through us in our lives. On the other hand I want to avoid a prescriptive use of the ten commandments which is often called the third use of the law. At the same time it can be said that they function as a restraint to keep us within the boundaries of the relationship. Then, too, these commandments have influenced much of our legal code. Therefore, a place must be given to them in deliberative ethics. The commandments, such as not to kill, not to commit adultery, and not to covet are given for a very important purpose, that of preserving life and its relationships. Time and space does not permit a detailed elaboration of how this task works itself out. It is sufficient for the purposes of this paper to say that this function must be kept in mind. Then, finally, the law functions to show all the need for the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus concludes the great commandment by saying, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." What was the work of the prophets? It seems that their message is best summed up in, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, Micah 6:18) and walk humbly before your God?" What is meant by justice? Together with this, what is meant by loving kindness? In the context it is saying, not that these things are necessary for salvation, but that an alive faith within the covenant relationship should bring about a life of concern for the neighbor. The particular understanding of justice in the Old Testament has to do with watching out for the poor and needy. This is contrasted to an

exclusive concern on retributive system of punishments. Amos stands out as a strong example of one who opposed the oppression of the poor and called for a true worship of God with a kindness for the other people. In the New Testament Jesus confronted the religious leaders who wanted the woman caught in adultery to be stoned. He took pity on her, and the leaders left them. Likewise, Jesus upset the tables of the money changers in the temple in order to counter their making of the temple a profiteering business. What does all of this say for the ethic being proposed today? It seems to say that the special concern of justice for the Christian should be in protecting the best welfare of the poor and needy. Whenever the church participates in an oppressive structure, it fails to do justice. Instead the church should take a special interest in those who need help.

At the end of this section I must come back to the critique by Frankena. He believes that&

The clearest and most plausible view, in my opinion, is to identify the law of love with what I have called the principle of beneficence, that is, of doing good, and to insist that it must be supplemented by the principle of distributive justice or equality. It is then, one of the basic principles of ethics but not the only one. If one does this, one must, of course, conceive of the principle of beneficence but also to be benevolent, i.e., to do it out of love•.

As is evident my emphasis of justice is different from that of Frankena. While he speaks of equality, I am arguing that often we need to be more than fair in order to attend to the needs of the poor and those who need help. I would have to agree that our system of democracy is built upon distributive justice and that this is entirely necessary. At the same time I hold to the doctrine of

the two kingdoms. The church, therefore, is distinct from the state. While the state maintains equality, the church needs to concern itself especially with those who suffer under the system. The second main difference has to do with the validity of the first of the two commandments. As would be expected Frankena is hesitant and unwilling to assert special revelation as a basis for ethics. He says that perhaps the first commandment could be considered the religious one and the second the moral one.⁸ I am concerned about

the ethics for the Christian community and how that is distinctive from other ethics. Therefore I hold, not only to the special revelation in Jesus Christ, but also to the special relationship to God made possible by Jesus Christ. Along with this I object to trying to split the two commandments too far apart. It seems that they go hand in hand. Faith in God is active in love for the neighbor.

II. Implications for the Pastoral Ministry

How does all of the above apply to the pastoral ministry? There are definitely some inappropriate ways to do ministry under this system. These would include prescriptive preaching and teaching, interpreting the Bible as a legal code, and constantly using exhortations for promoting ethical behavior. The key is in the relationship to Jesus Christ who has claimed us for his own as people of God. This relationship overflows into concern for the neighbor. At the same time we can accept ourselves with the acceptance with which we are accepted by God. The ten commandments can be used in deliberative ethics. Together with this concern for the poor is the special concern of justice for the church.

III. A Case Study

How can this ethic be applied in a specific situation? In going through a case study this can be illustrated. A young, married woman in the parish comes in for counseling. She is unhappy in her marriage for she feels that her husband does not give much attention or affection to her. In the course of the conversation she reveals that she is thinking of having an affair with another married man with whom she has become friendly.

To begin with it would be appropriate to focus on the relational aspects and not on some sort of prescriptive guidance. How is her faith active in love? What is the most loving thing to do in this instance? How would her intended action affect her nearest neighbor, her husband? How would it affect herself? Would she be showing genuine concern for herself in carrying this out, or would it be an act of eros, self-gratifying desire? How would her action affect the other man and his family? What must be distinguished is the difference between genuine concern and acquisitive desires. Realizing also that marriage is a covenant relation, both to give and to receive, I could suggest that she share her expectations of her husband so that they could give and receive mutually. Perhaps I could work together with both of them to facilitate communication.

It may be that we would get into a discussion of the commandments, especially the one of not committing adultery. This I could suggest to her that God gave as part of his gracious will to put boundaries on our relationships for our own good so that we could live in freedom within them. The commandments also function to show us that we

often stray away from these boundaries . We often transgress these relationships and hurt others and ourselves . In fact this is true for all people, in that all are separated from God and constantly need his gracious forgiveness and his reconciling love .

FOOTNOTES

¹William K. Frankena, Ethics, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), PP• 56-59.

²Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., A Survey of Christian Ethics, New York, NY Oxford University Press, 1967), P• 117.

George W . Ferrell, Faith Active in Love, Minneapolis, MN Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), P• 93.

⁴Long, P• 142.

⁵William J. Lederer and Dr. Don D. Jackson, The Mirages of Marriage, New York, NY W .W. Norton and Compa.nY, -Inc., 1968), P• 42 .

⁶Ferrell, P• 97.

⁷Frankena, P• 58.

⁸Ibid.

I think what you have done is well worth doing and that you have exercised some sound judgments & procedures.

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