

4/27/08

Gospel Ethics

Our Mission is to love God, To love people, and to influence our city and others to do the same.

¹Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ²and He began to teach them saying:

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

How many of you have seen the musical or the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*? If you haven't you owe it to yourself to rent and watch one of the best musicals ever made. The fiddler on the roof idea was inspired by Marc Chagall's painting called "The Fiddler." Chagall was a Russian Jew who expressed himself through the folk-life of his day, and incorporated biblical themes that sprung his Jewish heritage.

The fiddler is a little man with a cocked hat standing with one leg on a steep roof, playing the fiddle. So immediately we know we are talking about common folks. Sophisticated folks play violins; folks from Alabama and Texas play fiddles. The Fiddler is like all of us—folks who are trying to make some meaningful music out of our lives but lacking a level place to stand.

In the movie Tevye says, "We are all fiddlers on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant little tune without falling down and breaking our necks. And how do we keep our balance? I'll tell you" sings Tevye in the opening song of the musical, "**in one word I'll tell you, tradition! Because of our tradition, everybody knows who he is and what God expects him to do.**"

Think about that—What if in advance we knew what God expects us to do—before a new wind threatens to blow us off the roof of life, before the next crises threatens to shake our foundations—what if we knew what God expected of us?

Are there any directions from God? Is there any help for forlorn fiddlers trying to scratch out our individual tunes without falling off the roof?

Let's think about this. When the Godhead calls a staff meeting in Genesis 1:26 to consider the conceptual design of mankind, they concur that he/she should be made in their image and their likeness.

Genesis 1:26

"Let us make man in our image and after our likeness...."

So have you noticed, I mean is it any wonder that there is a strong expectation in the Old Testament that the people of God are to be like their God. Try this one of for size.

Leviticus 11:45; 1 Peter 1:16
“Be holy even as I am holy.”

Bit uncomfortable don't you think? And I would like to relegate that to Old Covenant Theology but then someone as morally challenged as Peter reiterates in the New Testament. Darn.

To read through the first five books of the Old Testament is almost to be washed away in a cascade of commands covering an enormous range of human situations which might arise in the community of God's people. There are commandments for settling civil conflicts, regulating customs, and guiding the moral lives of people who were brought together in covenant. The moral nucleus of all of these is what we call the Ten Commandments.

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five and six year olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," she asked "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."

Now that's interpreting and applying the Scriptures.

Sometimes our applications of The Commandments are not much better. We often view those commandments as God imposing something on us to bind us and restrict us. Be reminded that those commandments were given to the people of God immediately after they had gained their freedom from Egypt. Those commandments were intended by God to help us manage the responsibility that freedom brings. And in the final analysis they guide us to live lives that are *in his image* and *in his likeness*.

And if you can work your way through the rest of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers you're a bit overwhelmed by all that's expected of you. And folks discover over and over again that it's not easy living in the image and likeness of God. And if you're strong enough to make it to Deuteronomy (*deutero* = two or second; *onomy* refers to "law; *second-law*) so what you have is a expansion of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments.

And the next twelve hundred years or so has a lot to do with mankind trying to figure out this law thing. Being like God was hard work. And if meeting God's expectations weren't challenging enough by the time of Jesus' day, religious leaders had added another 613 laws intended to help you better keep the original ten. And then the holy rabbis had their own interpretations of the laws and the sub-laws, so if you arrived sometime early in the first century A. D. and if you were an orthodox Jew you were pretty tired pulling around that bag filled with the Decalogue, the 613, and the somewhat better interpretations of your latest and greatest TV Rabbi.

But in the midst of all this complexity and bondage came a rabbi from Nazareth that brought clarity and simplicity to the ethical laws of God. On the one hand, he knew and respected the Law and the commandments as being the revealed will of God in covenant with his people, but, on the other hand, he rejected most of the scribal and rabbinic interpretations of the law. His emphasis was on *moral law* rather than *ceremonial law*. When we say moral law we simply mean that there is such a thing as right and wrong, and there are some things that you "ought" to do, and some things that "ought not to do."

When we talk about ethics we are talking about,

Ethics = a system of moral laws or principles that govern appropriate conduct and behavior for an individual or a group.

Now in our context the individual would be the Christian and the group would be the Christian community.

Jesus was the most powerful ethical teacher the world has ever known and his genius was that He brought clarity and simplicity on how to live life *in the image* and *in the likeness* of God.

Now lawyers deal with ethical dilemmas all the time. An elderly lady had come to her lawyer for the drafting of her will. The lawyer charged her \$100.

She gave him a \$100 bill, not noticing that it was stuck to another \$100 bill.

On seeing the two bills stuck together the lawyer faces an ethical dilemma. What do you think is his ethical dilemma? (Do I return the \$100-NO) "Do I tell my partner?"

You'll remember a breathless lawyer comes dragging his bag of laws and interpretations and says, "**Jesus, which is the greatest of the commandments?**" And Jesus says in short, "**Love God. Love People.**" The lawyer asks for one command, but Jesus gives him two. Why? It was because those two were inseparable—two inseparable aspects of human responsibility, two inseparable aspects of living in the image and in the likeness—Love God, Love People. The lawyer must have been stunned by the simplicity of the response, but so strategic was Jesus' response that He said, "**On these two command hang all the Law and everything the prophets said.**" And if you know anything about the Ten Commandments you know the first four deal with loving God and then next six deal with loving people.

Now not only is Jesus' response to the lawyer a summation of the Law, and not only does it simplify the complexity of the law, but his statement signifies a shift in application. Love God. Love People.

Those two commands touch our inner life. Here's something else interesting—those two commands cannot be enforced. Those two commands must be responded to voluntarily. **You will love me you sorry sucker.** No.

So the ethical emphasis of Jesus was more vested toward an inner attitude toward the Law. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were more focused on the external; Jesus ethical code was an inside job. They were interested primarily in conduct; He primarily in character. Character being those qualities that make you distinctive, and Christian character is typified by living life *in the image* and *in the likeness*. Listen,

If the kingdom of God is God's ways of doing things, then the subjects of the kingdom are intent upon doing the ways of God.

And as a result there are wrong ways and rights ways—those are called *morals*. And **ethics are the moral standards of a people. Christian/Gospel ethics are the moral standards of God's people.**

It seems it would be important to ask some personal questions at this point: Like, What is my ethic? Is it legalistic following in the footsteps of the religious leaders of Jesus' day? Do you have a performance ethic which stirred the ire of Jesus when and caused him to called the Pharisees "white-washed tombs." You look great on the outside but you are putrid on the inside. Are you a Christian ethicist being reminded that the word Christian literally means "little Christs?" And Jesus, the Hebrew writer tells us, being the exact representation of the Father; Jesus who told an excited Philip who was longing to see God, "Phil, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father;" Jesus who lived the God-life, Jesus who was the epitome of the image and likeness of God, Jesus who is our prototype, Jesus who is our example, our visual aid to show us what life being lived out in the image and the likeness, still calls us to live lives that are holy because He is holy.

So what does God expect from us? Well, He unapologetically calls us to a high standard of living. You see living under a grace covenant doesn't mean that we become morally sloppy. So we live life in the tension of knowing that our God who challenges us to right living at Mt. Sinai is the same God who embraces us with unconditional love at Mt. Calvary. And the same God who calls us to be holy is the same God who frees us from any and all condemnation.

What God expects from ordinary people like you and I is obedience that flows out of our love and gratitude for him; what God gives ordinary people like you and I is forgiveness that flows out of his grace for us. And once forgiven, we hear his commands, not as a burden but as an invitation to enjoy our humanity believing that He best knows how to live life to the fullest.

Now being ethical, doing what God expects in not necessarily an easy assignment. As a matter of fact I've been thinking about this lately. Does God ever give anyone an easy, low risk, effort free job in the Bible? I don't think so.

God comes to Noah God comes to Noah and says, "The level of corruption and violence is so high on the earth that I'm going to start the whole thing over again, and I'm going to begin with you, Noah. I want you to gather your family together along with some animals. I want you to build an ark from scratch, and so that you get the feel for this, let's make it about two football fields long."

Now building an ark from scratch was a pretty big stretch because it had never rained before, so some historians thing this all took place in West Texas. So while Noah is feeling pretty overwhelmed God tells him something very important—"Noah, I will be with you and as a reminder I'm going to give a sign of our covenant; it's the rainbow and every time you see it you will remember "I'm with you. You're not alone."

So Noah meets the challenge, but in time humanity begins to drift again and God initiates another start. This time He comes to a man named Abraham. And He says to Abraham "I want you to leave everything familiar to you—gather your family and head west young man, head west. And I'm not going to tell you where you're going until you get there. And, oh, by the way Abraham, you won't be alone. I'll make a covenant with you. I'll be your God and you'll be my people. And I'll give you a sign of our covenant—your sign will be circumcision." Abraham said, "God, I hate to bring this up but Noah got the rainbow. God, couldn't we like do a secret handshake or something?"

God never seems to call folks to an easy job. He's always calling them to something beyond themselves, always stretching them, always overwhelming them with ethical dilemmas.

Now let's see if we can apply some gospel ethics to our lives. Let's apply some gospel ethics to say our mouths.

Developing Gospel Verbal Skills

Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7 are the greatest ethical sermon series ever preached. In the heart of his message is the simple but sane admonition of the Lord Jesus,

Matthew 5:37

"Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'"

Now let's face it human beings like to talk. Even those of us who have rather limited vocabularies understand the power of words. If you want to know how important the spoken word is just listen to a CD of Martin Luther King standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial saying "I have a dream, that one day the sons and daughters of former slaves and the sons and daughters of former slaves owners will sit together and join hands at the table of fellowship. I have a dream."

Words are wonderful things. They can be holy, sacred things. And at some level everyone of us has to be master of the art of words. And that's a good thing BUT—when the pressure is on, we face the ethical dilemma of misusing our word. Under pressure we will begin to use our verbal skills to shade things and hype things and spin things and exaggerate things and to expand things.

Sometimes our worst examples of this come from church. We'll have a staff member who has created more problems than solutions, led people in the wrong direction, unnecessarily caused a never-ending series of conflict and yet when we share his/her firing we say "Bro. So and So has resigned because he/she received A Call from God." That's dishonest and you've pulled God into it to reinforce your lie. I hate that.

Now I'm not suggesting that it's appropriate to do a full disclosure of every person who needs to leave. You don't get up and say "Ralph is leaving us. I never liked Ralph." You don't dump everything out there. You don't try to hurt Ralph. This is a poor time for revenge (like when is a good time for revenge for that matter). **You better make sure that what you say is congruent with reality because people close to you are watching and listening.** And when you are not careful with the truth at your place, it will become a breeding ground for cynicism and loss of moral.

There is a proverb that is so very true. It goes like this,

Proverbs 10:19
When words are many, sin is not absent,
but he who holds his tongue is wise.

William Bacchus, highly respected psychologist and writer who has written volumes about telling the truth, cites a research study that indicates that the average person in America tells 200 lies a day. That's just lies. You add anger, throw in a little gossip and slander, intimidation and you've got a pretty nasty day on your hands (hopefully it's on your conscience).

When words are many, sin is not absent,

So I got to thinking about a Words to Sin Ratio. Kind of a Sin Predictor Index. Lets say this ratio is 10 to 1. So if you say ten thousand words a day (men-women need to say 25,000 a day—my conclusion--women are much more acquainted with sin than men)

Now if you want to reduce your sinning per/day what's the easiest thing to do? Reduce the number of words. Cut your words down to say 5000, you cut your sins to about 500 a day. Think about this—if you could get down to 10 words or less... Wow! Now you are still going to hell but you'll be a nicer person. (Kristin Bunyard) Hey, however you want to slice this most of us have mouths that overload our bodies.

So what do we do about this? May I make a simple suggestion? I would challenge you to build in a little quiet time each day, where you get still, where you pull away and just meditate. I wish I could better explain what happens to you during these times but it kind of like rebooting your computer. Here's what I think you will discover as a result—what I think you will begin to realize that you can live without always getting the last word, that you can live without feeling like you have to control what other people are thinking about you. You can learn to live without having to win every argument or powering up for every decision.

I think Jesus got this one right when He said, "Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no, no." The core teaching there is "just speak simple truth."

So to everyone in this room, cherish and develop and implement all the verbal skills you have to the fullest extent possible. Motivate us and exhort us and encourage us and dream for us but also lead the way in speaking the truth in love. This is important because you making the ethical decision thousands of times each day as to how you will say what you say.

Developing Gospel Passion

In this series of ethical messages, Jesus say reminds us that

Matthew 6:21
For where you treasure is, there your heart will be also.

That could easily read

For where you treasure is, there your passion will be also.

Human beings by nature appreciate passion. Many of us like being gripped by an intense sense of urgency. Some of us like the heart pounding feeling, the adrenalin rush of being caught up in something bigger than ourselves. We love to see drive and devotion anywhere it's expressed--the passion of Michael Jordan for basketball, the passion of Tiger Wood for golf, the passion of Imelda Marcos for shoes

Passion brings color and drama to our lives. We would feel dead without it. Passion gives us the wherewithal to push on through, to keep on keeping on when it would be easier to quit.

But here's the danger. Passion is very addictive and can easily be misdirected. And if we aren't experiencing passion in one area of our lives, we'll begin looking for it in other places.

One of the ways for passion to get misdirected is through the avenue of sexual misbehavior. There is a reason for that-- Sexual excitement is one of the quickest ways to counterfeit deep emotional attachment.

Much of our nation has been shocked recently by the discovery that another one of leaders, Gov. Elliot Spitzer, was exposed as having connections with a prostitution ring for the last six years. During most of that time do you know what he was doing? He was passionate about pursuing organized crime. As a Manhattan district attorney he brought down the famed Gambino family in 1992. In 1998 he became the New York State Attorney General. Built a reputation for fighting white-collar crime, securities fraud, internet-fraud and fighting for environmental protection and did it all with unusual zeal and passion and offending many in the process.

I heard on national news that when it was announced about his sexual misconduct there was a cheer that went up at the New York Stock Exchange. That's kind of sad. Governor Spitzer your passion got misdirected! And you know what? Our passion can get misdirected too.

But passion problems don't just align themselves with sexual misbehavior, misspent passion can also turn to anger and rage. When we get frustrated or exhausted or disappointed, passion can easily boil into hurtful words that scald the people around you. Listen, there are more people in this room today than you can imagine who have been deeply wounded by the words of someone, maybe by a boss or a leader who decided that position and passion were license to inflict pain on someone lower down on the power grid.

Good Passion Management:

1. Keep your body, soul, and spirit refreshed and in tune.

Hey, nobody gets an inexhaustible supply of passion, and we all need enough rest to maintain our passion. Weariness makes fools of us all.

Feed your soul. Don't give in to the American way of life which lives by a constant inflow of sound-bites. Take time to read the uplifting, encouraging stuff. Take time to meditate. Read something beyond a fifth grade level which is the target of the A.J. Sometimes just for fun, strip down to your underwear, lay in the middle of the living room floor and listen to great music. It's incredibly invigorating.

Pursue something that's fun for you. Give yourself away. Just go waste a few hours helping somebody.

2. Keep your mission clear.

No one does well in complaint management for very long.

3. Keep your family and friends real close. Healthy relationships are vital to our success.

4. Keep up with relationships that replenish. Some relationships motivate you, some drain you. Know the difference and balance them as much as possible.

5. Keep that feedback coming in.

Get it from people who work for you and with you. Get from those you serve. Get from those over you. They often will tell you if your passion has been tipping the scales in the wrong direction.

6. Keep your joy factor high.

When your joy factor is low the temptation to do the wrong thing is much higher.

7. Get your treasures in right order.

(Matthew 13... The kingdom of God is like man who finds a treasure in a field and he goes and sells all that he has to obtain the field.)

8. Keep smart boundaries.

Here's an interesting observation. Spitzer's indiscretion was committed not when he was in his twenties, not when his hormones are outpacing his sanity. He's 49 years old.

There have actually been some studies done concerning this that corroborate the truth that keeping clear boundaries in the danger zone gets *harder* not *easier* with age. Do you find interesting that most church leaders who fall tend to be older.

That could be the result of a combination of factors—the sense they life is getting away from them; they don't like the ways things have turned out; there's the reality that they don't have time for another chance. But they will look for something that will make them feel deeply. And if it is not filled by the good things then invariably you get into trouble.

So set some smart boundaries.

Now why does your ethics matter so much to God? Because you matter so much to God. And He wants you living free and living life in his image and in his likeness. God likes it when you think like and act like and sound like him.

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God still calls us to be holy even as He is holy. That's a big assignment but He wants to enter into covenant with us about this. And He wants to give us some signs of covenant.

Written Word – will give you general directions on how to live life in the kingdom.

Holy Spirit – who will guide you into all truth.

Community of Faith, His Church, is to encourage in this walk of faith.