

Why Study Ethics?

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A simple answer would be “inquiring minds want to know.” Just look at the topics we will be studying in this series (and confronting in life)... who doesn't want to be able to give a proper answer to the dilemmas which confront us and others as we walk upon this earth?! Of course the problem is that everyone has their own ideas about what the answer is in each of these situations. Actually the world would have us to believe that all of these matters are simply relegated to personal choice and that there is no absolute answer to any of them. That in itself necessitates a study of ethics for any who desire to be true children of God, for we have been given the obligation to “prove all things; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 4:21).

In the book of Ecclesiastes we have the record of the efforts of King Solomon to “see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life” (2:3). As we go through this inspired record we find that Solomon did indeed examine much of what man deems “good” for life, all of which really fall into the three categories revealed in 1 John 2:16, “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” After this examination and experimentation Solomon concluded,

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

In this text we find the basis of our study as to why we should study ethics. Here we find:

- A definition of ethics
- The reality of the free will of man in making choices
- The imperative nature of having the proper character to make the proper choices
- The singular basis for making ethical decisions

When we examine these we will hopefully understand the question in the title of the lesson - “Why should we study ethics?” and of course the answer.

A Definition of Ethics

For a definition of ethics, one would look to philosophy and find that we are dealing with what would be called “normative ethics” which is “the development of theories that systematically denominate right and wrong actions” as well as “applied ethics, the use of these theories to form judgments regarding practical cases” (*Philosophical Dictionary*).

Of course God gives us a clear and concise definition in His Word if we will but look. According to our text, all actions in which we involve ourselves are either “good” or “evil.” The immense realm of choices before each of us is staggering! Consider for example the various studies which are being considered in this lectureship. And of course it seems our technology is going forth as such a swift pace that we will confront in the future other previously unheard of (and many times

unimaginable) decisions! Then of course we go to other realms – business (who is not familiar with Enron, Worldcomm...); politics (what of lying?; what of immorality? – again questions we are all too familiar with).

Our duty is to decide which we should do. A study of ethics deals with two basic facets:

- (1) determining these matters of right (“good”) and wrong (“evil”)
- (2) obligation of man to respond to this knowledge in a proper fashion. It is not enough just to know the answers, we must be willing to take responsibility to apply the answers to our life.

Of course this concept of determining and acting upon the results is nothing new. “Ethics” has been defined throughout God’s Word.

- In the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:9-13)
- In the days of Noah (Genesis 6:5-9)
- As the Israelites were about to enter the promised land (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)
- As Joshua spoke to the people who had obtained the promised land (Joshua 24:15)

We need to study ethics so that we will understand that we must determine the matters of right or wrong and explore the obligation we have to respond to and apply this knowledge to our life.

The Reality of the Free Will of Man in Making Choices

Note that the Wise man in Ecclesiastes did not search for what man “will do.” Calvinism has so permeated the denominational world and even the church that multitudes are deceived into thinking that man has no volition regarding decisions of right or wrong. Calvinism states that

"natural man is never able to do any good... and, in fact, does evil all the time... From conception and birth man is polluted with sin because of the fall of Adam... [Man] is not even able to understand the good... It is impossible for him to do good and please God" (Palmer 13).

Of course the problem is compounded when so-called science steps in with foolish assertions that a man’s genetic makeup determines such things as homosexuality.

Sadly it is not just denominations that are falling prey to the idea that man cannot make the proper choices God calls upon us to make, the church too must be ever aware to this foolish concept.

Of course Solomon made the truth clear when he said he sought for “what they should do” (2:3). Here he shows that mankind is clearly faced with a *choice* in what he does in his life. Again this is clearly in accord with God’s teaching throughout His word:

- Genesis 3:9 – “where art thou?”
- Genesis 3:13 – “What is this that thou hast done?”
- Joshua 24:15 – “choose you this day whom ye will serve”

- Matthew 23:37 – “...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”
- Acts 17:30 – “God ... commandeth all men every where to repent”

We need to study ethics so that we will recognize our free will in deciding the matters before us.

The Imperative Nature of Having the Proper Character to Make the Proper Choices

The necessity of these proper choices are indicated by three phrases in our text:

1. “this is the whole duty of man.”

Literally this would read “this is the whole man,” denoting what God’s desire is for the full ideal of man. We gain a better understanding of this “whole of man” concept if we look to the derivation of the word “ethics.” It is from ἦθος, which is the,

Greek word for custom or habit, the characteristic conduct of an individual human life. Hence, beginning with Aristotle, ethics is the study of human conduct, and the Stoics held that all behavior—for good or evil—arises from the ἦθος of the individual. (*Philosophical Dictionary*).

In Luke 4:16 we read of Jesus, “as his custom [ἦθος - verb form of ἠθω - jhw] was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day...”. In Hebrews 10:25 we read that we are not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner [ἦθος] of some is...”. In these passages what is being described is the very character – what they are. When we are faced with choices, our true character comes forth. Jesus chose to go to the synagogue on the sabbath day because of who He was – His character. Those who forsake the assembling of the saints show their true character. Solomon expressed the same thought in Proverbs when he said “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (4:23). Our decisions are a product of who we are.

2. “whether it be good, or whether it be evil”

Here we find that all choices before us are an “either / or” situation... good or evil. How far this is from the concept of immense “gray areas” in which many seek to justify their evil deeds! In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus did not speak of a broad way that leads to destruction, a narrow way to eternal life and a gray path between! He simply said there is a wide gate and a narrow gate ... two ways, evil or good (Matthew 7:13-14). In speaking of the resurrection to judgement He said “the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28-29). Two ways, evil or good. There is not a vast area of “gray” unknowable situations which we face. The fact is we *can know* by a study of ethics whether and act is either good or evil.

3. “God shall bring every work into judgment”

Here we confront the stark reality that *our choices will be of eternal significance*. Paul stated in the Hebrew letter, “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). And at that judgment “he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left” (Matthew 25:33). The sheep (those who chose good) will receive eternal life, the goats (those who chose evil) will be sent to eternal damnation (verse 46).

We need to study ethics so that we can understand the imperative nature of having (developing) the proper character to make the proper choices.

The Singular Basis for These Ethical Decisions

“Fear God, and keep His commandments”

Oddly enough, for centuries (actually for the whole history of the world) mankind has struggled with the question of whether ethics can in fact be taught as objective and knowable. “The issue is an old one. Almost 2500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates debated the question with his fellow Athenians. Socrates' position was clear: Ethics consists of knowing what we ought to do, and such knowledge can be taught” (*Can Ethics Be Taught*)

Oddly enough the debate still rages:

In a recent editorial, the Wall Street Journal announced that ethics courses are useless because ethics can't be taught. Although few people would turn to the Wall Street Journal as a learned expert on the teaching of ethics, the issue raised by the newspaper is a serious one: Can ethics be taught? (ibid)

Today we face not only the idea of whether ethics can be taught but whether there is an objective and knowable standard for such decisions. Given what we have already learned from our text we surely realize that if we do not have a singular basis for ethical decisions we are doomed!

While there will be other lessons which address this in a more complete fashion our text gives a clear and decisive answer – “Fear God and keep His commandments.” Such refers not only to the character we have already discussed (“fear God”) but makes plain that “His commandments” are the singular source of our ethical decisions. When Solomon saw the futility of following, “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16) he saw the value and necessity of that divine standard for life - the Word of God.

Again this is set forth time and again as the singular standard for the ethical decisions with which we are faced. In the beginning Satan realized this and sought to pervert it with the addition of a single word – “Ye shall *not* surely die” (Genesis 3:4). Jesus likewise made it clear in the parable of the sower that the devil's goal is to keep this Word from being found on “good ground” and thus bringing salvation (Luke 8:4-15).

We need to study ethics so that we can be assured that there is a singular standard by which we make ethical decisions and this standard – the Word of God – is inspired, all sufficient and knowable.

Conclusion

Why study ethics? *We need to study ethics*

- *so that we will understand that we must determine the matters of right or wrong and explore the obligation we have to respond to and apply this knowledge to our life.*
- *so that we will recognize our free will in deciding the matters before us.*
- *so that we can understand the imperative nature of having (developing) the proper character to make the proper choices.*
- *so that we can be assured that there is a singular standard by which we make ethical decisions and this standard – the Word of God – is inspired, all sufficient and knowable.*

King Solomon determined to “see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life” (Ecclesiastes 2:3). His conclusion was “fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

What is YOUR conclusion?

Works Cited

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