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Matthew 7:12, NRSV.

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Do not be conformed: Christian Ethics.

The most widely recognized statement about Christian ethics is Matthew 7:12:

¹² *"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*

This refers to "*the law*", and that covers Genesis through Deuteronomy, specifically, Leviticus where much of the law is specified, and Deuteronomy, where Moses reiterates the Law to a generation born in the desert during the Exodus. But the Law is also detailed in Numbers and Exodus. Perhaps the only potentially confusing part of this verse, which is spoken by Jesus near the end of his famous, extended Sermon on the Mount, is "*and the prophets*". When Jesus refers to "*the prophets*" he is referring to material in the historical and prophetic books where the Prophets pass on commands from God. So, Jesus is saying that everything that the Law and the words of the Prophets tell us implies that we should treat other people the way we want others to treat us. An implication of

this is that we need to act with empathy by seeing things from the perspective of all people whom we encounter. This proclamation makes it clear that we must take action in life. Faith that is only internalized is false. This “Golden Rule”, as it is often called, is very similar to the second of Jesus’ two great commandments:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” which is directly quoted from Leviticus, from the Old Law. Paul has a version of this in his letter to the believers in Rome:

¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he provides more details about living in an ethical way. He tells us to avoid anger, lust, telling untruths, and seeking revenge. We should love our enemies. We should be pious in a sincere fashion, not simply so that others see us. We should avoid materialism. We should not judge others. But let’s remember something else that Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount:

¹⁷ *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”*

Jesus is saying that he is not here to somehow replace or toss aside the Law of the Israelites, of the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather, he is here to realize in a concrete way, how to live the way God wants us to live, what the Law truly implies. He’s also saying that everything he has taught about us moral and ethical living can be derived from the Law. Jesus is giving us a path to God, how to live by the laws of

God, not a new legal system. One of the major aspects of this is a focus on grace and faith, rather than following a law simply so that others see us doing so.

The works of the twelve Minor Prophets are thought to have survived largely because they were put into a single volume sometime before 200 B.C.; they cover a period from about 800 B.C. to 400 B.C., including the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the permanent dispersion of the 10 “lost tribes”, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple, and the return from exile, including the construction of the Second Temple. They cover a critical period of Israelite history. The Minor Prophets, as their works are short, tend to not have the historical detail that we find in the Major Prophets. The Minor Prophets tend to focus on narrower issues, and are often easier to read, requiring of the reader much less historical context. As a result, sometimes the foci in the writings of the Minor Prophets are more eternal since they are not so historically rooted. Amos, Micah, Zechariah, and Joel are particularly known for their emphasis on ethical behavior, often calling on the rich and powerful people of society to not manipulate the courts, to not steal money and land from defenseless people, and to not hide behind publicly pious behavior when they are in truth refusing to help the poor and the disabled. The Minor Prophets also tell us to care for foreigners who wander into the Promised Land.

Before we look at a more modern take on Christian Ethics, I'd like to share a brief story with you that caused me to come up with the idea for this message. Perhaps a year ago, Wendy and I went to the farm where we buy a share every year. In return for a very modest amount of money, we get a collection of fresh vegetables each week. I've learned to love some vegetables that I had never heard of before. One thing that this farm makes from time to time is tortillas from corn that they grow. One day when we went there and Wendy asked for tortillas; they were out, but they said that another local farm sold their tortillas. All we had to do was drive a couple blocks and buy them there. So, we got back in our car and headed for this other farm. It was a bit hard to find, but we got there. I learned something about ethics – and how it's a two-way thing.

In a precise sense, morals are the practical expression of how to live out abstract ethical standards. But they both help us distinguish right from wrong, so we will consider them to be the same thing. There are multiple ways that modern scholars and theologians classify basic Christian Ethics and Morals. One of them is called "Virtue Ethics", whereby as we approach a moral situation, we are trying to behave in a way that models as closely as possible the character of Jesus Christ as described in the Gospels. As time goes on and we confront one moral or ethical situation after another, we are gradually building a stronger Christian character,

becoming more Christ-like. We aren't focused on following specific rules: we are simply using our reasoning and our faith training to mold ourselves into people of true faith. We incrementally become the people that God wants us to be. In this way, we not only behave in a proper way in the eyes of God, but we find a deep sense of calm and peace.

There is a psychological component to this. God invented us and invented the ways we think. So, God invented the notion of a habit. We feel more secure when we behave in a consistent, familiar fashion. And habits turn into intentionality. When we do something enough times, it becomes our identity, the way we want to behave, the way that makes us feel most like ourselves.

A second way to view Christian Ethnics is called "Natural Law", which says that morals and ethics are based on something inherent in the human condition. Ethics and morals are thus something we can learn, we can discover. We do not create them. To an atheist, this might mean that they are somehow rooted in the human brain from birth. To us, it means they come from God. This means that we can learn to behave the right way, that with the right training, we can discover the natural way to act. While the Law that we read in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and we see echoed in some of the Minor Prophets, is based on divine command, that is, God's direct order, there is a strong commonality between

ancient Hebrew Law and Natural Law. That's because the Law in the Old Testament is always conveyed as being clear to human reason. The Proverbs are full of sayings that guide us to ethical behavior according to God's Law, but they typically portray it as obvious to any thoughtful person. Proper behavior is thus seen as the easy path to happiness. From the Christian perspective, Natural Law doesn't as much depend upon always trying to mimic Jesus as it does on using our faith training to help us reveal normal behavioral ethics.

A third way to categorize Christian moral behavior is called Divine Command Theory. This is perhaps the way I was trained as a kid. What is right and what is wrong depends simply on what God commands. God defines good and evil. Our duty as being made in the image of God is to obey God when it comes to ethics. Atheists might conclude that right and wrong is thus arbitrary because we are not asking ourselves if we *a priori* believe that something is right or wrong, and perhaps God himself isn't using that as a basis for engineering his commandments. We believe, though, that God is good and perfect, and that therefore, God will not arbitrarily separate good from evil. As Christians we see Christ's commands to behave with forgiveness, grace, and in community with others as adding more detail to the divine commands of God.

The fourth and last view that we will take of Christian morality is called Prophetic Ethics. This draws in large part on the demands of the Prophets and Jesus to avoid doing things simply because we are told we have to do them, or perhaps for the sake of tradition and fitting in with our faith community, and instead, embrace ethical behavior because we believe in social justice, mercy, forgiveness, and kindness. So, yes, we see ourselves under Prophetic Ethics as holding ourselves responsible for caring for people because the Prophets tell us to do so, but we must come to understand that this is the right way to behave. A special emphasis is on how our actions impact the least powerful in our society.

Below is a passage from the Minor Prophet Amos. He served from about 760 to 750 B.C. This was a time of peace and economic prosperity for the people of Israel. It is before the Babylonian exile. It is also before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians. Israel was thriving, but not intact, as the north and south had broken into two nations.

- ⁴ *Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,*
⁵ *saying, "When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,*
⁶ *buying the poor for silver*

*and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”*

⁷ *The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.*

⁸ *Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who lives in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?*

This starts out by telling businesspeople that because they abuse the needy, they are bringing ruin to all of Israel. These businesspeople know that they are not supposed to sell on the Sabbath, but they only obey the law because they are forced to by society, not because they are honoring it as a day of rest and reflection on God. They wish they could sell all the time. The Prophet says that sellers in the marketplace are using fake scales to weigh things, that they steal from people just to buy extra sandals, that is, not because they need the extra money to survive. And disgustingly, they mix sweepings and dirt in with the wheat to make it weigh more. The prophesy ends with a statement that God is not going to forget any of this. As a result, God will make the earth roll up and down like the movement of the Nile when it floods.

Let's consider our four kinds of ethics. For Virtue Ethics, certainly Jesus wouldn't behave this way, and if we want to become more like him, we would never cheat anyone. For Natural Law ethics, we would consider this something

we can learn, that this knowledge comes from God and it is therefore up to us to never abuse people who are simply trying to get the food they need to survive. For Divine Command Theory ethics, it's simple: Hebrew Law in the Scriptures is filled with commands to behave in an honest fashion. Finally, this passage is a statement from a Prophet, so from the perspective of Prophetic Ethics, we know that the Prophets, several of them, spoke of the penalties for thievery.

Perhaps what this all means is that there is nothing wrong with analyzing the notion of ethical behavior. Given that God gave us powerful, sentient minds, it is perfectly natural to examine ethics and morality from an intellectual perspective. It also means that in truth, these four ways of looking at how we should behave all lead us to the same place. It shows the naturalness, the consistency of Christian morality. This all makes perfect sense, and indeed, the world would certainly be a better place if we all took ethics seriously.

Getting back to buying tortillas. When we got to the second farm, we discovered an unmanned outdoor counter piled with packages of tortillas, made by our favorite farm, along with a handwritten sign indicating the price of each package, and an open box of cash. No, Wendy did not take all the cash and instruct me to quickly grab all the tortillas. Instead, she took two packages of tortillas, put some cash in the box, took the change we had coming – and we left.

Aside from there not being very many places in this country where vendors would dare do this anymore, and certainly not in most urban situations, there is a lesson here about ethics. It's a two-way deal. Yes, the vendor must be honest, and so must the buyer. We can't abuse those who are trying to make a living. We don't even have the excuse that they might not necessarily be playing by the rules, the Law. Even if a vendor somehow seems to be charging too much or selling goods that are of lower quality, we still do not steal.

Here are two other passages that tell us that the buyer is as responsible for being honest as the seller. First, Leviticus 25:14:

¹⁴ When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another.

This is easy to interpret, and it tells us that ethical behavior is indeed a two-way commitment. Here is Proverbs 20:14:

*¹⁴ "Bad, bad," says the buyer,
then goes away and boasts.*

This one is a bit harder to interpret. A buyer might discover that a seller is undercharging for something and make a big act of how high the price is. He says, "Bad, bad," as if he were overpaying, but then pridefully laughs at the seller later. But the lesson is that when a seller accidentally undercharges, the buyer is the unethical one.

Finally, Scripture does indeed tell us a lot about how we should behave. But Scripture, the Laws of Moses and the commands of Jesus, as well as the advice of scriptural writers from the Prophets to letter writers of the New Testament, often need to be interpreted. We also need to interpret the rules for moral and ethical behavior in context of our times, the structure of our culture and what we encounter in daily life. This means that we do indeed have to use our minds and think in a very deliberate fashion about how our faith impacts the way we behave today. Here is Paul in Romans, telling us that indeed, God wants us to use our minds when it comes to finding an ethical path through life:

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

There is a powerful distinction that is implied in this extremely famous quote, and I want to end with this: Yes, we must “*discern*” with our minds what God wants us to do in any given situation. We must think about what is “*good and acceptable and perfect.*” But notice we do this by NOT being conformed by the things of this world. We interpret the guidelines and commands of our faith in relation to today’s world, but we are applying eternal moral values to the current context rather than letting the current context of society twist our values.