

Ethics of Ministry (part 2)

Christian Character

The message for the previous Teaching Legacy and this one was brought by Derek to a group of pastors and lay leaders in Cuba in 1996. Because of restrictions imposed by the Cuban government, Derek was allowed to speak only to small groups in house settings. His comments were addressed to leaders in that locale, but can be equally applied to Christians everywhere.

THE CHARACTER PSALM

Having established in my last letter the fact that Christian character only comes through the cross, let's look at a picture of the character God expects, found in Psalm 15. It begins in the first verse with these questions:

*LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle?
Who may dwell in Your holy hill?*

PSALM 15:1

The rest of the psalm contains the answers to the questions. The psalmist David lists eleven characteristics of the people who will dwell in God's holy hill. If we are going to dwell there, we need those characteristics. Remember that they are produced by grace, but a grace that works.

Let's look now at these points about the person who will dwell in God's holy hill. I want to suggest to you in advance that they are the answer to Christian ethics. If we practice these eleven points, we will have no ethical crises in the Church.

- 1. The one who walks uprightly** (verse 2).
- 2. He works righteousness** (verse 2). He doesn't just preach it; he does it.
- 3. He speaks the truth in his heart** (verse 2). What comes out of his mouth is what is in his heart. He doesn't say one thing with his mouth and have another thing in his heart.
- 4. He does not backbite with his tongue** (verse 3). He doesn't speak against other people behind their backs. Somebody said

that many Christian ministers are wounded in their backs. It is other Christians who have wounded them.

5. **He does not do evil to his neighbor** (verse 3).
6. **He does not take up a reproach against his neighbor** (verse 3) or his friend. In other words, if you try to tell him something bad about his friend, he will not listen to you. He will not take it up. He won't go around telling others, "You know what I heard about so-and-so?" This is one of the most important points of Christian ethics.
7. **In whose eyes a vile person is despised** (verse 4). This is very interesting—he doesn't bow before the wicked. It may be a very important person in politics or even in the church. But if he is vile, he is despised by this man.
8. **He honors those who fear the LORD** (verse 4). He shows respect for all of God's children—even those who might seem unimportant. He treats everyone with respect.
9. **He swears to his own hurt and does not change** (verse 4). If he makes a commitment, he sticks to it, even though it may work out to be to his own disadvantage.
10. **He does not put out his money at usury** (verse 5). He doesn't take usury (interest) from somebody who has borrowed money from him. If a brother in the Lord says to me, "I need some money. Can you help me?" it would be very wrong for me to charge him interest. I would be taking advantage of his troubles.
11. **He does not take a bribe against the innocent** (verse 5). You cannot buy him to do something against an innocent person.

At the end is this promise: "He who does these things will never be moved" (verse 5). A person like that is unshakable. If all the elders in the Church were like that, there would be no problems in the Church. For all I know, they may be. Psalm 15 is the answer to Christian ethics. You don't need to go further than that.

PRIDE OR HUMILITY

Coming back to the New Testament, we read in Colossians:



For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who

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is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

COLOSSIANS 3:3-5

How and where did we die? The answer to that question is: on the cross.

Christ is our life. It is important to know that—it is a life that cannot be destroyed. It cannot be extinguished. It is undefeatable and it will continue forever. But in verse 5 we get a therefore, and I always say, "When you find a therefore in the Bible, you need to find out what it is there for."

You are dead, but Paul says, "Now put to death your members that are on earth." In other words, you have to keep them dead. It will not be just one single experience, but a life of continuing discipline.

Moving on now to Philippians:

Therefore if there is consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

Here Paul describes our attitude if we are to keep unity in the Body of Christ. He uses various different words, but in my opinion, there is one word that covers it all. It is humility. Humility is the key to unity.

In Proverbs 13:10, the first half of the verse says, "Only by pride cometh contention . . ." (KJV). What is the cause of contention in one word? Pride! So the solution is just the opposite: Humility! And the Bible never says that God will make us humble. The Bible always tells us to humble ourselves. This is something we have to do for ourselves.

Returning to Philippians 2:3:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

In my opinion, the greatest single problem in the Church is selfish ambition. Personal ambition aims for me to succeed, for me to build a big church or have a big meeting. It centers in “me.” The contemporary church in some places is full of selfish ambition.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE VITAL

Let’s talk a little bit now about personal relationships in the Body of Christ. Christianity is primarily a religion of right relationships, not right doctrine. You can have the right doctrine and have wrong relationships.

We Christians sometimes spend too much time on doctrine. We are very exact about some doctrines. If people don’t have exactly the same doctrine as we do, we say we can’t have fellowship with them.

After all, the Gospel is not a set of rules. It’s not a statement about God. Your relationship with God doesn’t come through knowing about God. The Gospel is designed to bring us into a right relationship with God. If we know all the facts about the Gospel but don’t have a relationship with God, it has not achieved its purpose. Any preaching of the Gospel that does not produce that is a disaster. Relationships are very important.

Now I want to deal with a passage where Jesus speaks about how to maintain right relationships. He starts in Matthew 18:15–17.

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

If possible, settle these situations without involving anybody else. But if you can’t solve the problem with him alone, take two or three others as witnesses of what is said.

There are three steps. First, go to your brother by himself—one on one. If you can settle it, then you don’t need to go any further. Second, if you can’t settle it, then take two or three reliable witnesses so that there is a record of what has been said. Finally, third, if that doesn’t settle it, then bring it before the whole church. Whatever the church says must be done. If he will not listen to the church, then don’t treat him as a fellow-believer any longer. He has lost the right to be called a believer.

That makes the church very important, doesn’t it? I often ask myself if some churches are in a condition where they have a right to do that.

THE POWER OF HARMONY

Jesus goes on in verses 19 and 20:

“Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”

The word agree is translated “common accord,” but it’s a musical word. It is the Greek word that gives us the word symphony. It speaks about harmony—not just intellectual agreement, but being in the same spirit with people. Jesus says an amazing thing, “If two of you can harmonize on earth about anything that they ask, it will be done for them.” That’s an amazing statement, isn’t it?

Who are the two most obvious people who should harmonize? Husband and wife. I thank God that I’ve had that relationship both with my first wife and with my present wife. Basically, when we pray, we pray based on harmony. God spoke to us just recently and said, “If you can maintain harmony between you, there is no stronghold of Satan that can resist you.” So I speak to those of you who are married: Cultivate harmony with your spouse.

Jesus says in verse 20:

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

That is the basic unit of the church—two or three gathered “into the name of Jesus.” And it’s *into*, not *in*. In other words, the meeting point is the name of Jesus. The name of Jesus represents Jesus. So we do not gather around a doctrine. We do not gather around an experience. We gather around the Person. That is the basic unit of the Church: two or three gathered *into* the name of Jesus.



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Then we go back to verse 18.

“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

That is such tremendous authority we can hardly believe it. It says, *“Whatever we have bound on earth will be having been bound in heaven.”* When you bind it on earth, it is already bound in heaven. And when you loose it on earth, it is already loosed in heaven. In a certain sense, the authority of heaven is committed to us as believers.

But notice, it’s we who must do it. I’ve often heard Christians pray and say, *“God, bind this or bind that.”* That’s not what the Bible says. God says, *“You bind it in My name.”* We have to have the faith and the courage to do that. Then, when we have bound it on earth, it is already bound in heaven.

GOD, OUR FATHER

I’ve got one more thing to say. First of all, I would like to give a testimony from personal experience.

Recently, my wife and I, as usual, were praying sitting up in bed in the morning. I felt my body being moved by a power. It was like it moved up from my feet to my legs through my whole body. My whole body was being shaken by this power. Ruth told me afterwards that my face went absolutely bright red.

It was not something we were thinking about or praying about. It was entirely spontaneous from God. I had an impression that there was an arm stretched out toward my head trying to force a black skull cap onto my head. I had the impression that it had something to do with the fact that I was born in India. This is just my impression, but it was as if one of the gods of India was trying to take control of me. This hand was removed, and I was set free from whatever it was, and I had a revelation of God as my Father.

Now, I have believed in God as my Father for many years. I’ve even preached a series of messages of knowing God as Father. Doctrinally, I had it all right, but this was different. This was a personal relationship with God as my Father.

I had a very good father, who was an officer in the Army. He was a good man, and he provided well for my mother and me, but he had no idea of what it was to be a father. I grew up without ever knowing what it was to have a father. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I had this revelation of God as my Father and having a personal relationship with Him. It really produced a great change in me personally. I felt a new security. My purpose in life was to please my Father. My security was that my Father loved me.

I believe that is what the Christian faith should be. But you see, it gave me such security. I didn’t have to prove myself right. I didn’t have to be a success. All I had to do was please my Father. And I didn’t have to worry about where the money came from or other material needs. I just knew God was my Father and He loves me. And I realized that’s how Jesus lived on earth.

He said, *“I do always those things that please My Father”* (John 8:29). His motive was not success. When He was successful, it did not inflate Him. And when He was abandoned by people, it did not depress Him, because His peace didn’t depend on that. It depended on pleasing His Father.

Over the years I’ve seen many Christian ministers who are very insecure because their security depends on success. If they have built a large church, then they feel secure. But then if the church splits and they are left with just a few people, their security is gone.

I have a different view of life altogether. For me, success is to please my Father. And security is knowing I am loved by my Father. I believe that’s what the Gospel is supposed to produce. I believe that really is the way God wants us to live. I believe it is the answer for the whole question of Christian relationships. If we get our relationship right with the Father, all other relationships will fall into place. ▲

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