

## Foundations of Christian Ethics (3/1/15, TCP)

### Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of Law & Obedience:

Christians recognize that we do not have the capacity to perfectly obey God’s law. Our hope is not in the law, but rather in God’s grace and forgiveness. Nonetheless, we recognize the value of the law as a teacher in the Christian life, and by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, we seek to obey God and live holy lives that the law describes. The law is practical and less intuitive, and we avoid the law becoming an idol in itself.

**We start with Holy Scripture.** There are commandments clearly listed (see below), and there are issues that are less clear. Faithfulness to scripture as the rule and authority in the Christian life involves careful and comprehensive reading, listening too for how the church has read the issue from scripture. We do well to avoid discarding scripture on the one hand and “proof-texting” on the other. Proof-texting is basing an opinion on one small parcel of scripture without being informed by the rest of scripture. A comprehensive approach that seeks to integrate the whole of scripture is important to Anglicans. A nuanced approach can also be abused, of course, so humble fidelity to scripture is an important posture for us to take.

Obedience to God is described in Holy Scriptures & church teachings, most prominently in

**The Summary of the Law**

**The Ten Commandments**

**Jesus’ New Commandment**

**Traditional wisdom such as**

**The “Seven Deadly Sins” (or “Capital Sins”) and “Seven Cardinal Virtues.”**

**Other teachings of the church, including Just War principles**

**The Summary of the Law** (see also BCP, p.324 & 351):

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind [or strength]. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* Matthew 22:37-39: Jesus quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18

This grounds the law in our primary relationships, with our primary obedience to God. We cannot know how to love our neighbor without loving God with our whole lives. We cannot love God if we do not also love our neighbor. All laws and obedience stem from this summary. We know ‘the good’ by knowing and loving God, and loving our neighbor naturally follows. Note that love of self is not emphasized by itself in scripture—only in relation to God’s love for us, and forgiveness of us, despite our sins. Our tendency is to abuse our love of self. Only in God’s love can we rightly love ourselves.

From this basic summary, we find two basic principles: **the primacy of God above all else in our lives, and the dignity and worth of every human being.** Thus actions and attitudes that diminish God in our eyes or before others is clearly sinful. Likewise, actions and attitudes that diminish other people, even sinful people, are also sinful. In no case are we to be the arbiters of right and wrong—such judgment is not up to our fallible preferences or desires, but rather up to God. Our conscience must be *formed* to avoid vice (habits of the heart that lead to sin) and promote virtue (good habits of the heart, and gifts from God).

## **The Ten Commandments**

(see Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:1-21, and BCP p.317, 350, & 847):

- 1) I am the LORD your God, you shall have no other gods
- 2) You shall not make for yourself an idol
- 3) You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God
- 4) Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy
- 5) Honor your father and mother...
- 6) You shall not murder
- 7) You shall not commit adultery
- 8) You shall not steal
- 9) You shall not bear false witness
- 10) You shall not covet...

The first four describe love of God, the last six, love of neighbor. We can both observe and infer both basics of ‘the good’ and ‘the evil.’ The emphasis on avoiding evil in the language of the Ten Commandments betrays the problem: our tendency to do evil.

### **Jesus’ New Commandment** (see BCP, p.851):

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” John 13:34. We are to exhibit love, not only by the human standard of our love for ourselves, but by Jesus’ standard of his sacrificial love for us in dying for us—even while we were still sinners. Thus the law is not a law lived for punishment of others, but a law of love. This new commandment is crucial for Christian ethics: orienting our ethics toward the mercy and love of God rather than mere legalism. This points us in the direction of ethics in terms of relationships (more later).

## **Teachings of the Church**

### **“The Seven Deadly Sins” or the “Seven Capital Sins:”**

The Church tradition (pulling from philosophical traditions) includes this list of sins as an aid in identifying sources or trends in evil. Their explanation takes us to questions of purposes of our desires and passions. These sins have been called “disordered loves” because they warp natural and wholesome desires and passions created for good purposes. But as a list, they can also function as a sort of list of disobedience.

- 1) Pride: the primary sin of putting self over God
- 2) Greed: covetousness, inordinate desire for things, can lead to sins such as theft
- 3) Envy: hatred for someone because of a good that they have; hardly a love at all, for it is a hatred of someone or the good itself because it is good.
- 4) Wrath: inordinate anger, usually that leads to other sins such as violence or hatred
- 5) Lust: inordinate desires of the flesh (especially sex, but other desires as well)
- 6) Gluttony: inordinate desire for excess (including, but not limited to food)
- 7) Sloth: not so much laziness, as much as inaction borne from despair; rejection of the grace and blessings of God.

## **Seven Virtues:**

### **The Cardinal Virtues:**

- 1) Prudence: practical wisdom: knowing what to do and when to do it.
- 2) Justice: fairness: treating equals equally. Although it may be appropriate for the ordering and protection of society, using “justice” primarily as just *punishment* is rarely theologically Christian, since Christ paid the penalty for us, showing mercy over just punishment due.
- 3) Fortitude or Courage: the proper balance between foolhardiness and cowardice.
- 4) Temperance: the proper balance between inordinate desire and the loss of desire.

### **The Theological Virtues: gifts from God that form our human capacities**

- 1) Faith: the knowledge of God (forms the mind)
- 2) Hope: confident expectation and openness to the future (forms the will)
- 3) Love: the experience of God in relationship with God (forms the whole person)

**Other Teachings of the Church:** help us to apply the principles of the Christian Life to new conditions or situations, such as drug abuse, mass media or biological technology. Teachings about violence and war are part of this tradition as well. Episcopalians often avoid strict rules on contemporary issues, though a counter example would be racism, or certain forms of sexual abuse or misconduct in the church. Because such teaching might not be explicit in holy scripture, they are more subject to debate, especially from a protestant view. But churches (especially the Roman Catholics) can develop principles from scripture that buttress church teaching on contemporary issues.

Generally speaking, Protestants have tended to express ethics in terms of obedience and disobedience. The Protestant Reformation was shaped by language of justification under the law (see Romans). So the works of the Christian life traditionally were evaluated with the same language by Protestants.