

Old Testament Perspectives on Ethics

Introduction:

1. The subject of Old Testament ethics is a greatly ignored and much misunderstood area of study.
2. A “Marcionite” tendency exists among most modern scholars.
3. However, if the basic ethics of the Old Testament differ from that of the New Testament, a serious problem arises:

“To hold, as the churches do, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Calvinist, and virtually all others, that the law was good for Israel, but that Christians and the church are under grace and without law... is implicit polytheism.” Rushdoony

Discussion:

- I. Limitations in Old Testament Ethics.
 - A. Nationalistic
 1. Some aspects of the Old Testament deal with “national” laws for Israel.
 2. While such laws often contain principles that are valuable to us, the specific laws are often unlike those things found in a spiritual kingdom.
 - B. Historical
 1. These limitations deal with matters peculiar to a particular historical setting with cultures often foreign to our own.
 2. Again, however, underlying principles are of continuing importance.
 - C. Custodial Laws
 1. These were designed to keep Israel separate from the surrounding nations.
 2. Such laws were needful until the coming of Christ.
 - D. Material Blessings and Curses
 1. Much of God’s dealings with Israel was within a system involving a land, an earthly king and material blessings.
 2. The principle behind such laws must be sought.
- II. Old Testament Ethics Require an Understanding of the Threefold Division of the Law of Moses

- A. Moral Law
 - B. Civil Law
 - C. Ceremonial Law
 - D. These aspects cannot be separated one from the other; however, that different laws address different parts of life cannot be denied.
 1. All the laws of Moses stood or fell together (Matt. 5:17-19).
 2. For there to be a change in one part the entire law had to be changed (Heb. 7:11,12).
 3. Yet these three types of law must be properly understood before an Old Testament ethic can develop.
- III. Barclay Suggests Several Helpful Ideas for Understanding Old Testament Ethics
- A. Revelation is necessary (Isa. 8:20; Lev. 19:2).
 - B. History is indispensable (Deut. 7:18; 8:2; 15:5).
 - C. Covenant relationship is vital (Deut. 7:6-8; 9:4-5).
 - D. Obligations are required.
 - E. The concept of a chosen people is important (Amos 3:2; Deut. 27:9-10; 32:46-47; Lev. 18:1-5; 20:22; 19:2).
 - F. The connection between religion and ethics must be understood (Deut. 23:17; Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6).
 1. This separated Israel's everyday ethic from those of surrounding nations.
 2. It must separate the church today.
 - G. The Old Testament ethic is comprehensive: every man, every action (Lev. 19:6).
 - H. Old Testament ethics exhibit compassion for the helpless (Deut. 10:18; 1:17; 16:19; Lev. 19:15).
 - I. The ethics of the Old Testament required basic responsibility (Ex. 21:28-32).
- IV. One Area That is Often Overlooked is The Place of Inward Principles (Ps. 15; Isa. 33:15; 56:1; Micah 6:6-8; Amos 5:4; Hab. 2:4; Lev. 19:2, 18; Deut. 6:4-5; Hos. 6:6).
- A. True service had to come from within (Isa. 1:11-18; Jer. 7:21-23; I Chron. 28:9).
 - B. Outward service by the mere letter of the law has never been enough.

1. II Cor. 3 does not teach that God accepted merely outward service under Moses.
2. Neither does it teach that the Jews could not please God because their Law would not allow it.
3. Jewish misunderstandings had caused the nature of the Old Testament law to be veiled.
4. Christ showed it in its true light as a grace, faith system.

V. The Basic Old Testament Ethic Was Universal in Nature

- A. Gen. 18:25; 13:13; 19:13; Rom 1:18-32; Isa. 13:23; Jer. 45-51; Ezek. 25-32; Dan. 2,7; Amos 1-2; Obadiah; Jonah, Nahum.
- B. Through this we see that God does not excuse the world from the ethic that is based in His very nature.

VI. The Confirmation of an Old Testament Ethic

- A. A harmonious accumulation of progressive truth runs through the Old Testament.
- B. God takes a people and continually refines them throughout the history covered in the Old Testament.
 1. Israel is brought to an ever increasing awareness of the depth of the implication of her law.
 2. Jesus brought this into full focus in the Sermon on the Mount.
 3. The fulfilled Old Testament ethic is the final ethical word of God for this life.
 - a. This ethic is in Christ in the church.
 - b. It is not a materially different ethic; it is the fulfilled principles of the Old Testament now served in the New Covenant of Christ.
- C. In this progression is seen the confirmation of the reality of Old Testament ethics.
 1. Continuity prevails.
 2. Harmony pervades.
 3. Purpose abounds.

VII. The Summation of the Old Testament Ethic is Holiness of God.

- A. Lev. 19:2 states the matter plainly.
- B. God by his nature is separate.
- C. To be in true fellowship with God one must partake of his holiness
- D. The Old Testament reveals this different sort of character necessary for true integrity.
- E. It is not enough to be different, one's difference must be as God's.

Conclusion:

1. The Old Testament is the foundation for New Testament ethics.
2. Jesus lived a perfect ethical life within the framework of the Law of Moses.
3. Our New Testament ethic is thus not a different ethic, it is a fulfilled ethic.