

The Basis for Biblical Ethics

Romans 12-16

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Bible Text: Romans 12:1

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Open to Romans chapter 12 and verse one. We are going to go a bit slow here at the beginning of this last section of the book of Romans. We will deal with verse one on this week and verse two on next week. Let's read together Romans chapter 12 verse one.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."¹

There is a mouthful there. Amen?

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice."²

What a word picture, a living sacrifice in light of the temple worship with which Paul's hearers would have been familiar where sacrifices didn't live, but to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

Here we have the source and ground and foundation of Christian ethics. How do we do what is right? How do we know what is right? How do we evaluate the rightness or wrongness of any action? That is the question. There are many ways that Christians have tried to approach this. But approach it we must.

Christianity is not a theoretical religion. God does not save us merely to give us a new outlook on life, nor is our righteousness merely positional in nature. God actually changes who we are.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."³

¹ Romans 12:1.

² Ibid.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Therefore we must move from the theoretical to the concrete. We must move from principle to application. Our faith must impact our every day life. Therefore Paul calls us to present our very selves to God as living sacrifices.

James Edwards notes that this issue concerns not religious renewal or increased spiritual consciousness, but the transformation of bodily existence as an expression of spiritual worship. Changing who we are, changing how we behave, not just changing the way we think, though we must do that and we will get to that on next week. But this changes our very behavior. This is where positional righteousness becomes actual righteousness, where faith meets practice, where orthodoxy gives way to orthopraxy, where our calling is reflected in our conduct. In short, we have moved from the indicatives of the first 11 chapters to the imperatives in the last portion of the book.

Now as way of reminder, remember. Whenever we read in the Scriptures, whenever we are reading here in the New Testament, whenever we are reading in the epistles we are on the look out for indicatives and imperatives. An indicative. This is a hymnal. I am indicating what the thing is. An imperative: Open the hymnal. That is an imperative. I am telling you something to do. So when we read in the Scriptures, we have to be aware of the indicatives and the imperatives. Why? Because the indicatives tell us what God has done or accomplished in us, what he has done or accomplished on our behalf. The indicatives tell us who we are in Christ. And the indicatives remind us of both the power and the motivation to carry out that with which we are charged. The imperatives, that is all that God commands of us. But when we see those commands we do not go about trying to accomplish them in our own strength and in our own power. Instead, we point back to the indicatives that show us who we are in Christ, what God has accomplished in us, what God has made of us and we are thereby empowered and motivated to accomplish those imperatives. If we confuse the indicatives and the imperatives, we end up in works righteousness. If we confuse the indicatives and the imperatives we end up in Legalism. If we confuse the indicatives and the imperatives we confuse what the gospel requires and what the gospel produces. What the gospel requires is repentance and faith. What the gospel produces in us is obedience to all God's commands.

So in the first 11 chapters Paul has painstakingly walked through the indicatives of the Christian life, the indicatives of justification, the indicatives of sanctification. He is showing us who we were and what God in Christ has accomplished in us, for us and through us. And now we come to the second half of the book and it gets skin on it. It is no longer theoretical. Now he demonstrates for us, he shows us what the Christian life actually looks like when the first 11 chapters are true of us.

You see, when the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans are true of us, it doesn't just put us into a position to talk about justification and to have theological, theoretical, philosophical debates. When the first 11 chapters are true of us it actually manifests itself in the way that we live and in the way that we interact with one another so that that idea of righteousness becomes a life style that manifests and expresses that righteousness that Christ has wrought in us.

Let's go here to our confession. What is an ethical act? Look at our confession. Look on page 678 of your hymnal, probably 679 of your hymnal. Chapter 16 of good works. We will come back here to chapter 16 again and I would commend the entire chapter to you.

For the sake of time we won't do it all here today. But look with me. Chapter 16, paragraph seven.

“Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the word, nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, nor make a man meet to receive grace from God, and yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God.”

In other words, if we are going to judge an action, here is how we must judge an action. It has to be a right action. It has to be done from a right heart purified by faith. It has to be done in a right manner according to the Word of God. And it has to be done to a right end, to the glory of God. Then and only then do we have a right and/or ethical action. If someone does the right thing from a right heart in the right manner, but does it to the wrong end, their own glory, then their action is still unethical and sinful, because they are seeking to glorify themselves. If they do the right thing from a right heart and they do it to the right ends, but they do it the wrong way in a fashion that is unbiblical, it is still a sinful, unethical act. If someone has the right heart, the right manner and the right ends, but they do the wrong thing, it is still a sinful act. It must be a right action from a right heart done in the right manner and done for the right ends in order for it to be considered an ethical or righteous act. And if it does not rise to that level, it is sinful. It is unacceptable.

And let me just put a little caveat here. You have never done an act like this before. Just in case you were wondering. You haven't. All of your actions have such a mixture of your own faults and errors that none of them are ever acceptable to God in and of themselves, but it is only because you are positionally righteous in Christ that God considers your actions acceptable and righteous and holy.

But how do we arrive at a proper understanding of biblical ethics, a proper understanding of how and why we do the right thing? Bear with me for a moment as I go through a few of these possibilities before getting to the one that Paul offers to us here in Romans 12:1.

First, there is the golden rule approach to Christian ethics. This approach is really based on the fact that Jesus said:

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.”⁴

Or, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, the golden rule of ethics. That idea is usually based in this foundational assumption that we want to live in a world and

⁴ Matthew 7:12.

we want to be apart of a society where people act in a way that is appropriate. And if you want to be part of that world, then you part in that is to do things in a way that you would want them done to you, so that you can perpetuate that kind of ethic. The motivation here is the problem. This becomes manipulative and it becomes man centered. Why did I do that action? Because I wanted to receive it in return. In other words, the source and foundation of my ethics is myself, my pleasure, my comfort. The source and foundation of my ethics is to manipulate you to live in a certain way toward me. The source and foundation of my ethics is to create a society and to create an environment that does to me what I want. That means that it is inherently self centered. So the ends of it are not to glorify God. The ends of it are to satisfy me. Therefore the golden rule, not an acceptable foundation for Christian ethics.

And remember that even that text is found within the context of the Sermon on the Mount and that is not what Jesus is arguing for in the Sermon on the Mount. It doesn't meant that the golden rule is bad. It is just the improper foundation for our Christian ethics.

Secondly, the fear of God. This is the Roman Catholic approach. Calvin writes, "It is enough for the papist, or Roman Catholics, if they can extort by terror some sort of forced obedience." Listen to this from the Council of Trent, session six, canon 24 and then section six canon 30. By the way, the Council of Trent is the Roman response to the Reformation. It is the dogma and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church as it is considered infallible. Vatican I did not overturn Trent. Vatican II did not overturn Trent or Vatican I. This is the doctrine and dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. And since it is considered infallible it cannot and will not be overturned.

And I quote, "If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also increased before God by good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a cause of its increase, let him be anathema or cursed."

This is a curse of damnation upon the one who believes that salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is another gospel. This is the ethics of the fear of God.

More specifically, canon 30 and session six: "If anyone says that the guilt is remitted to every penitent sinner after the grace of justification has been received and that the debt of eternal punishment is so blotted out that there remains no debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world or the next in purgatory, before the entrance into the kingdom of heaven can be obtained, let him be anathema."

I say, again, this is another gospel. So how does this work? Here is the source of your ethics. God is holy, righteous and full of wrath toward the wicked. Secondly, you are wicked and deserve God's wrath. Thirdly, you must do all you can to assuage the wrath of God. You will not, however, accomplish that here in this life. You will ultimately have to finish that work in purgatory through paying for your sins.

Of course we know the problem with this. Christ died for sins once for all, the just for

the unjust in order that he might bring us back to God. It is not Scripture, but it is true. There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. We do not act because of the fear of displeasing God. That is not the ground of our ethics.

Thirdly, the law of God. We act because God has said it is right. This is much closer to where we are going not land. The idea here is that, first, God has laid down a universal transcendent law in the Decalogue, 10 Commandments, universal transcendent law of God. Secondly, all actions are judged ultimately by that standard, by the standard of God's law. Thirdly, and here is from the Confession, chapter 19, paragraph five.

"The moral law does forever bind all as well justified persons as others to the obedience thereof. And that not only in regard to the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the creator who gave it. Neither does Christ in the gospel in any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation."

This is true. But is that the ground of our ethics? What is the problem? If we stop here and make the law the ground of our ethics, what we can end up with this idea. Saved by grace, kept or sanctified by works. Justification is of grace, sanctification through the law. I have heard that precise statement, by the way, from one who holds to this position.

Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Is that hat Jesus is saying? You have heard it said... and then what does he refer to? The Mosaic Law. And where does he go from there? But I say to you... There is a higher standard than just the keeping of the written Word.

By the way, don't fear. Our confession clears this up in chapter 19. Chapter 19 does not hold that this is the ground of our ethics. I will explain that later. The other problem, of course, James makes it clearer, James chapter two and verse 10.

"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."⁵

You have to keep the whole law. We can't keep the whole law.

So what is left as the grounds of Christian ethics? What is left for us in determining what is right? What is left for us in moving forward in obedience to God? I will tell you what is left for us, the mercy of God. That is what is left for us. That is the ground and foundation upon which we build our ethics. Again, I read:

"I appeal to you brothers..."⁶

And that word appeal is not a strong enough word. The apostle is not begging here. He is exhorting here. Keep that in your mind. The apostle doesn't go through the first 11

⁵ James 2:10.

⁶ Romans 12:1.

chapter and then say, “You know, in light of the 11 chapters, yeah, it think it might be pretty good idea if maybe, I don’t know, you tried...”

No. That is no what he is saying here. He is exhorting here.

“I [exhort] you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [service of] worship.”⁷

There is one thing that he says here. Here is the imperative. Give your body to God. Give your whole self to God. Give everything that you have and everything that you are to God. Based on what? His mercy in the first 11 chapters.

Listen to this from John Calvin. “But Paul, that he might bind us to God, not by servile fear, but by the voluntary and cheerful love of righteousness allures us by the sweetness of that favor by which our salvation is affected. And, at the same time, he reproaches us with ingratitude except we, after having found a Father so kind and bountiful to strive in our own term, to dedicate ourselves wholly to him.”

Paul says in light of the mercies of God, that is the ground of your ethics, the gospel. The ground of your ethics is the indicatives. What God has done in you and for you and through you in Christ. That is the ground of your ethics. Who God has made you in Christ. That is the ground of your ethics. What God has shown you through what he has done in Christ, that is the ground of your ethics. That is where you derive both the power and the motivation for your obedience. So what does that look like?

There is a middle image here, that of the animal sacrifice. They know what this means. So here is the picture. When you come to sacrifice at the altar, what do you come with? You bring your bull or your lamb or your goat. You bring it unto the law in order to be sacrificed. Its throat is cut. It dies. What does it represent? It represents your failure to keep the law. That this what it represents. So you come before God with your bull and you say, “I have not kept your law. I need to be forgiven because I have violated your law.”

This bull is slain, it is killed.

“...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”⁸

And therein by faith you believe that God has accepted your offering. And because he has accepted your offering you are forgiven.

But what would it look like if you brought a bull in light of the finished work of Christ?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hebrews 9:22.

“God, I know that you have sacrificed your only begotten, perfect, sinless, precious Son for the sins of your people.” But I just thought I would add the blood of this bull just in case Jesus was lacking anything.”

How dare we? So what do you bring? You bring you. You bring you. And you lay yourself on God’s altar. This, Paul says is your spiritual worship or your logical liturgy in the Greek. This is the only thing that makes sense. In light of what God has accomplished in Christ, the only that makes sense is not that you would bring another offering, but that you would give yourself to God, that you would lay yourself on the altar, that you would turn yourself over and relinquish all rights to yourself, that Christ has now purchased you, that you are his, that your life is now hidden with Christ. You were crucified with Christ and yet you live, not you, but Christ who lives in you.

Listen to this. All ethical systems make some appeal to moral law and rules. Paul, however, makes not appeal to moral principles. He appeals solely to God’s mercy. If Christian morality were simply a deference of divine wrath, then it would not be morality at all. It would simply be some sort of moral ransom rooted in fear. If it were done in hopes of receiving something from God, then it would be manipulative and ego centric. True Christian ethics, on the other hand, are ethics of gratitude, the obedience, pleasing to God, is characterized by free and willing submission because of God’s prior sacrifice of his Son in our behalf. That is the ground of our ethics. Because of what God has done in Christ, because of what God has done in you through the finished work of his Son, because of you are in Christ.

That is why Jonathan Edwards writes, “True virtue must chiefly consist in love to God.” We do it because we are grateful. So what does this look like when you break it down logically?

Here it is. One, go back with me to Romans chapter one and we will look at this. First, we have been made righteous by God’s redemptive work. Look in chapter one verses 16 and 17.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it...”⁹

Often times we look at verse 16 and we do not look at verse 17. Verse 16 is good. Amen? But look at verse 17.

“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”¹⁰

What does this gospel produce in us? Righteousness.

⁹ Romans 1:16-17.

¹⁰ Romans 1:17.

Secondly, this was accomplished through the person and work of Christ. Look at Romans chapter 3:21-26.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.¹¹

Remember. That word propitiation means he satisfied the wrath of God. Again, fear cannot be the ground of our ethics. There is no fear for us, because the wrath of God has been fully assuaged by being poured out on his Son.

“...to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”¹²

So God has accomplished this work in the person of Christ.

Thirdly, we cannot add to that which Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Look at the next part of the passage.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.¹³

Four, Christ’s work makes us both judicially and actually righteous. Go to chapter five verse 18.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.¹⁴

There is our positional righteousness in Christ.

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also

¹¹ Romans 3:21-25.

¹² Romans 3:25-26.

¹³ Romans 1:27-30.

¹⁴ Romans 5:18-19.

might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁵

Chapter six verse one.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Not just judicially righteous or positionally righteous, but actually righteous. Christ did not die so that I might have symbolic righteousness before God. He was the first born among many brethren. I am being conformed to his image. You are being conformed to his image. He did not die just so that you could be theoretically righteous before God. But in order to make you actually righteous and to increase righteousness in you because you are in Christ and Christ is in you.

Five. Therefore we have both the power and the motivation to obey. That brings us to 12:1.

“I [exhort] you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God...”¹⁶

Why? Because you have been made righteous, because the work was accomplished through Christ, because you cannot add to it, because his work doesn't just make you positionally righteous, but actually righteous. In view of that, give your body to God. That is the only thing that makes sense. It is your spiritual worship. It is your logical liturgy that you would give your body to God.

Now back in our confession chapter 19, turn with me if you have your hymnal still open. Chapter 19, go to paragraph seven. Some of you were worried there by paragraph five and may have thought that there was some Legalism being advanced here. Let's go to paragraph seven. That would be on page 681 of the hymnal. After speaking about how useful the law is in our lives in a number of ways, shows us what holiness and righteousness is, reveals the sin that is in us, all of these and so on and so forth, paragraph seven.

“Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it, the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.”

¹⁵ Romans 5:20-21.

¹⁶ Romans 12:1.

You see, the fact that the gospel is the ground and the foundation upon which our ethics are built—and here is where some people make the mistake—some people make the mistake in saying, you know, yes, here is this new law, the law of love. And because we have this new law, the law of love, we don't look at God's moral law anymore. But the fact of the matter is, as we have read again and again and again in Romans, the law is holy. The law is righteous. The law is good. So how do you connect these two things? Here is how you connect them. Because we are in Christ we have both the power and the motivation to obey God's law. Don't believe me? Turn to the right and look at chapter 13. And eventually we will get here, but, again, this is the last section. Here are the imperatives. This is how we go from the abstract to the concrete and we answer the question: What does that look like in the life of a believer? How do you live this righteous life to which we have been called, this righteous life that we have been enabled to live? How do we accomplish it? And what does it look like when it is accomplished? Do we accomplish it through keeping the law? No, we don't accomplish it through keeping the law. We accomplish it by Christ, because of what Christ has accomplished in us. We accomplish it because of the motivation that we now have, because of what Christ has accomplished in us. But when we accomplish it, what does it look like? Chapter 13 beginning in verse eight.

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”¹⁷

See, there it is, right? Those 10 Commandments thing, they are gone. All we have got now is love. We just have to love each other. Let's just keep reading shall we?

[For] The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.¹⁸

Let me help you understand what Paul just said. So let the law of love, love your brother. Amen. I am glad we get rid of that 10 Commandment stuff. No, actually, you love your brother that way. But, no, I have got something better than the 10 Commandments. Really? Let me see if I understand this correctly. You think you could love your brother and not... second table of the law here, ok? First table of the law, our duty to God. Second table of the law, our duty to our fellow man. Second table of the law, we are talking about loving your brother, ok? You love your brother, but you will not honor your brother. Honor your mother and your father. That is the Fifth Commandment, the first commandment in the second table of the law, or the bridge between the first table and the second table.

I love my parents. I don't honor them. I don't obey them, but I love them. What does that mean?

¹⁷ Romans 13:8.

¹⁸ Romans 13:9-10.

Sixth Commandment, you shall not murder. I love my brother. I killed him, but I really do love him.

Seventh Commandment, you shall not commit adultery. I love my brother, my sister in the Lord, my wife. I cheated on her, but I love her.

You shall not steal. I love my brother. I took something that belonged to him, but I love him.

You shall not bear false witness. I love my brother. I lied on him. But I do really love him. And if you could see inside of me, all you would see is love bubbling up for my brother.

Do not covet. Do not desire for yourself that which God has given to your brother. I love my brother, but I want what he has got to be mine. I want to deprive him of it, but I love him.

Do you see this? Paul is saying there is no disconnect between the two. And here is the difference. If you are not in Christ, there is no way in the world that you can avoid violating those commandments. You can't. You can't get there from here. But when you are in Christ there is no way in the world that you can continue to be formed in his image and conformed to his image and pursue the breaking of those commandments towards your brother. You won't do it. You won't do it and pursue Christ simultaneously. You can't. Those things don't operate together. And so when I am breaking these commandments, what do I do? Do I double down and knuckle under and try harder? No. Why am I breaking the Commandments? Because my flesh is prone to wander. Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the one I love.

So what do I do? Do I try harder to make my flesh obey or do I run and flee to Christ knowing that as I pursue Christ and as Christ is increased in me that the result of that is that I do not pursue the violation of these commandments. Do you see that?

You see, one of these things breeds works righteousness. The other breeds humility and faith.

Let's apply this a little, shall we? Let's look, for example, at a husband loving his wife. Let's go through these grids of a husband loving his wife and the way we pursue a husband loving his wife. Again, that is an imperative. It is an imperative in the book of Ephesians that comes in the second half of the book of Ephesians. Providentially we just finished the first half of the book of Ephesians today in our New Testament reading. The first half is all about the indicatives and we just finished with that great crescendo about the indicatives, about who our God is, who Christ is, about who we are in Christ, about us being seated with him in the heavenly places. We he just finished all those indicatives about what Christ has accomplished in us, about this great unity between Christ and his body the Church, how he exercises that headship over his body the Church and how the

Church brings glory and honor to Christ. That is the first half of the book. Now we get into the second half of the book and all of the sudden we find these imperatives. And one of these imperatives is: Husbands, love your wives. Well, what if we take the golden rule approach to this? If we take the golden rule approach to this, here is what it looks like. When a husband and wife sit down before you, you say, "Hey, would you just tell him how it makes you feel when he does whatever it is that you don't like that he does?"

Well, that makes me feel bad and it makes me feel unloved and it makes me feel unappreciated and it makes me feel unwanted.

Ok, stop. Do you hear what she is saying that she feels bad and she feels unappreciated and she feels unloved and she feels unwanted? Would you want to feel like that?

No.

So, then, don't you think you ought to love her in a way that you want to be loved?

Golden rule ethics. How long is that going to patch up your marriage? What she really needs from you is this. What you really need from her is that. Here is a little secret. If you give her what she needs, she will be more likely to give you what you need. That pretty much sums up about 90 percent of the Christian marriage books out there on the market today, the golden rule ethic of marriage. Think of your partner.

Am I saying that you shouldn't think of your partner? No, I am not. But I am saying if that is your motivation, then it is idolatry. Why? Because your goal is what you can get from that other individual. And that is idolatry.

Secondly, the fear of God approach. Love your wife. Why? Because God is watching. And you are going to have to give an account. So you just need to do it.

The law of God rule. Love your wife. Why? Because God commands it. And he does.

The mercies of God rule. Love your wife. Why? Here is why, because Christ gave himself for his bride the Church, literally died for her. He was nailed to a cross for her. He breathed his last for her. You happen to be part of her. And he has said to you that your love for your wife is a living, breathing picture of what he has accomplished in the gospel on behalf of his Church. And so because of what Christ has done in you and for you and through you, you now have the ability and the motivation to turn that toward your wife because of the esteem that you have for Christ and because you view her as a member of his body and desire for your love to be a sanctifying influence turning her back toward him so that you give to Christ both your love for her and the fruit thereof laid before his altar.

What if she doesn't love me back? When was the last time you loved Christ perfectly? When was the last time you satisfied him? When was the last time you gave him your all

or your best? Then how dare you expect from your wife as your bride what you have never given to him as his bride.

Gospel centered, the mercy of God centered. That is how you get there from here. Yeah, but I just don't feel like it. Of course you don't, because you are a wretched, nasty, rank sinner. That is why you don't feel like it. But when you don't feel like it, where do you go? You run to the cross so that you can be reminded of what Christ has accomplished in you and for you and what he desires to accomplish through you. And what that does is it reminds you of your own state, causes you not to think so much of your ruined, rotten, unworthy self and it allows you to turn back having been reminded of the grace that you have received, so that you can then in turn allow God to pour out that grace through you.

Boy, didn't that sound way different from, "What she really needs is this. And if you give it to her, then you are more likely for her to give you what you really need, which is that"?

Do you see this? The ground of our ethics is the gospel. The ground of our ethics is the mercy of God. But what do we see when we look at the mercy of God? We will end with this. When you look at the mercy of God and what God has accomplished for us in Christ, the first thing you see is this. You see how holy and righteous God is, so holy and so righteous that he would crush and kill his own Son for the sake of that holiness and righteousness.

The second thing you see is this. It is that sin is never to be taken lightly. It cannot be taken lightly.

The third thing you see is this. It is the value and dignity of human life. Think about this for a moment.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."¹⁹

The God of the universe who has existed eternally as the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit knowing nothing but harmony and unity in the godhead, turned and poured out his wrath on his Son on behalf of creatures like you and me. What does that say about his esteem for us? That we were created in the image of God. When you look at the mercy of God, you don't concentrate on the value of yourself. You concentrate on the value of mankind because of the value that God places on his Son and the fact that his Son was sacrificed on behalf of men. You must then respect people. You must. You must. And when you look upon the mercy of God, you cannot but recognize the weight and magnitude of the debt that you owe.

How can you repay that? You can't. But listen to this. Again, the confession chapter 16, 678, paragraph three. Here is how it all works together.

¹⁹ John 3:16.

“Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ; and that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is necessary an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

So the Spirit is not only the source in general of all of your good works, but, in particular, he motivates you to desire and to do God’s pleasure.

“...yet they are not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty...”

That doesn’t mean you just sit there as though there is nothing to do.

“...unless upon a special motion of the Spirit, but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.”

I can do no good thing but by God’s Spirit. Not only is that true in general, but it is true in particular in that God’s Spirit must motivate me both to will and to work for his good pleasure. But what that doesn’t mean is that I sit down and wait until I sense some supernatural motivation.

I can do no good apart from God’s Holy Spirit in general and in particular. It is God’s Holy Spirit that must work in me to will and to work for his good pleasure. I have been redeemed by Christ. His Spirit dwells in me and God has told me what is good. So guess what? I pursue that which is good, because God has made it possible, not I sit here until I think... No. I pursue that which is good, because God has made it possible. God has changed my very nature and so I pursue the nature that God has now given me. I used to be an herbivore. Now I am an omnivore. Amen? That is what it is to change your nature. You are an herbivore, you just go and you eat vegetables and fruit, because that is all you want. You won’t even... I mean we put all kind of meat before you that they can put before you, but you won’t eat it, because it is not your nature. That was us. That was us before we were born again. Our nature was to sin.

Righteousness could be put right there before us, but it was not in our nature to pursue it and we weren’t going to pursue it. Nobody had to force our will not to pursue it. Our will didn’t want to pursue it. We weren’t going to pursue it. We had every opportunity, but we didn’t have the ability. Now all of the sudden we are born again and our very nature is changed. So now I am no longer the herbivore. I am an omnivore. So what do I do? Why I sit and watch meat hoping that some of it falls in my mouth. Or do I go kill, eat? God has changed my nature so that I can now desire and pursue the good and the righteous, the beautiful, the just, the holy.

So what do I do? Sit here and wait for some righteousness to just pop out of me? Oh, no. I exhort you, brothers. Don’t just sit there. In view of this mercy the only thing that makes sense for you to do, your spiritual worship, your logical liturgy, the only thing that makes sense for you to do is to give your whole body to God that he might do with you,

in you and through you that which he foreordained and has called you to. That is what you do. You pursue the good and the righteous, because you can. That this what you do. And when you find yourself outside of those things, you don't just double down and gird up your loins and try real hard, you turn your face back toward the cross, recognizing that that is both the source and the motivation for all of your ethics.

Now I recognize that this is the long way around. But I promise you we needed to get here, because for most of us we have been hanging out in one of these other realms. For most of us we have been operating in golden rule ethics or fear of God ethics or law based ethics. For most of us that is where we have been we have not been in mercy of God based ethics. So here is what ends up happening. I do the right thing, but I have the wrong motive. Therefore it is not right.

I love my wife, but I love my wife because that is what she needs and if I give her love then she will turn back around and give me submission, because that is what I need. Did I do what I as told to do? Yes, I did what I was told to do, but why did I do it? For myself and my own edification and desires which means it is idolatry and it is sin. It is a non starter. Do it because it said so, non starter. Do it because I am afraid to displease God, non starter. And if any one of those is your answer you don't understand the gospel. No, it is not just how you get saved, it is actually the foundation of your ethics. It is how you live. The gospel is how you love your wife. The gospel is how you raise your kids. The gospel is how you interact with your brothers and sisters in Christ. It is all rooted and grounded in the mercies of God so that every act whereupon you give yourself to God is done not out of fear, not out of manipulation, not even out of law keeping, but it is done because you are absolutely overwhelmed by the mercies of God in Christ.

That this where righteousness is found.