

Grace Baptist Church

Willmar, MN

“Pause & Ponder” by Pastor Ryan Snyder

Ethics (3-11-2016)

“Ethics” concerns right and wrong words, actions, and thoughts. From a Christian perspective, ethics concerns whether we are either obedient or disobedient to God. Ethics in our culture today is typically approached from a **secular** perspective, which means that it is conceived from a perspective that is patterned after this world, according to the traditions of men and the elementary principles of this world. The term “secular” is derived from a Latin term that refers to this time and realm; that is, the “secular” time and realm is that of our physical senses, whereby we see, taste, touch, hear, and smell. A secularist is really a materialist, in the sense that he or she believes this physical time and realm *is all that really exists*. A secularist studies ethics like a sociologist studying common human customs and behaviors; that is, a secularist surveys either what people’s current opinions are about what is ethical or how people typically behave and then the secularist essentially accepts what is considered either “agreed upon opinion” or “normal behavior” in our culture as the standard for what is ethical (which really is not a “standard” since it moves with the winds of cultural change).

One of the Bible verses pertinent to our topic is Romans 12:2, which states: “**And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.**” Clearly, a dichotomy here is given between two ways of thinking; that is, there is a way of thinking that is conformed to this world and there is a way of thinking that is not conformed to this world. In essence, the way a secularist thinks is according to this world. As a cross-reference for Romans 12:2, we could add Colossians 2:8, which states: “**See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.**” Philosophy means literally the love of wisdom. Philosophy according to Christ is good, but philosophy according to the tradition of men and the elementary principles of this world is, in the final analysis, empty. In sum, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds according to the philosophy of Christ and the wisdom He provides us in the Scriptures.

So, do these Biblical verses mean that everything a secularist says about ethics is false? Well, not everything that an unbelieving secularist thinks or writes is bad or false. It has been said that a stopped clock is right twice a day. In Acts 17:28, for example, the Apostle Paul quotes the secular Greek poet Aratus to make the point in his argument that in a general, created sense every human being is a child of God, created in God’s image, and everyone is, therefore, accountable to God (Acts 17:31). It is significant to note here that a *truthful* statement was written by an unbelieving, secular Greek poet and quoted by the Apostle Paul as a true statement.

In the Christian worldview, every human being is created in the image of God. What does it mean to be created in the image of God? One of the many things it means is that every human being, whether a Christian or an unbelieving secularist, has some innate knowledge within him or her of what is ethical. This point is established in Romans 2:14-16. In this Scripture, it states that although the Gentiles did not have the written Scriptures that the Jews had been given, that did not mean that the Gentiles did not have any knowledge of God’s law. There is a sense in which every human being created in the image of God has His ethical standards

(God's "Law") written in their hearts, which is why our "conscience" either accuses us or defends us when we have committed either unethical or ethical behavior, whether we are Jew or Gentile.

What portion of God's law is written on our hearts (Romans 2:14-16)? The consensus of church history is that the Ten Commandments are written on our hearts, as creatures created in the image of God. Christianity views the Ten Commandments in Exodus Chapter 20 as a general summary or crystallization of God's ethical standards. In other words, if one were to condense and distill all of the complex details of God's ethical standards down to ten broad, general principles, they are the Ten Commandments of Exodus Chapter 20.

But can the Ten Commandments also be distilled and summarized further down into two broad, general ethical principles? The answer is yes. We know that God wrote the Ten Commandments down on *two* tablets of stone and gave them to Moses at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 31:18). The first tablet of the Ten Commandments contains ethical principles concerning our duties to God and the second tablet of the Ten Commandments contains our duties to our neighbor (take a moment and read the Ten Commandments in Exodus Chapter 20; clearly, the first half of the Ten Commandments contain our duties to God and the second half of the Ten Commandments contain our duties to our neighbor). In the New Testament, a lawyer trying to trick Jesus asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was in God's Law and Jesus replied: "**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.** This is the great and foremost commandment. And the second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and Prophets" (Matthew 22:35-40). In essence, Jesus summarized the first tablet of the Ten Commandments as "**you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart . . .**" and Jesus summarized the second tablet of the Ten Commandments as "**you shall love your neighbor as yourself**" How do I know when I am loving my neighbor as myself? I know that I love my neighbor as myself when I do not murder my neighbor, when I do not commit adultery with my neighbor's spouse, when I do not steal from my neighbor, when I do not bear false witness against my neighbor, and when I do not covet anything that belongs to my neighbor (Romans 13:9). And the same logic applies when pondering how to know whether I love God with all of my heart. I know that I love God with all of my heart if I have no other gods before Him, etc.

So, God's ethical standards are summarized in the Ten Commandments and are written on every person's heart because every human being is created in God's image (Romans 2:14-16). But is our personal conscience always a sure ethical guide to follow? If God's law is written on everyone's heart, as Scripture states, then why do so many people in our world have different opinions regarding what is ethical? Scripture is clear that one's conscience can be "**seared**" by sin (I Timothy 4:2). That is, we can "**become dull of hearing**" (Hebrews 5:11), like sprinkling mud on your car windshield making it hard to discern the right path to take. Another way Scripture refers to this searing and dulling of our consciences is in Romans 1:18-32. Romans 1:18 speaks of sinners who in their wickedness "**suppress**" or "**hold down**" or "**twist**" God's ethical standards.

What is an illustration of how men and women twist God's ethical standards? The Ninth Commandment of the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20 states: "**You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor**" (vs. 16). One may *twist* this ethical standard by saying: "Sure, we have an ethical obligation to tell the truth. But a little white lie is fine here and there, perhaps to prevent someone's feelings from being hurt, or making sure one meets a sales quota, or making sure that the company which one works for is financially benefited, etc." Scripture is clear that "**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). The world around us then is as we would expect from a Christian worldview: a world evidencing some sense of common ethical principles (because God's law is written on everyone's heart), but in various warped and twisted forms (because human beings are sinful).

Most unbelieving secularists in our culture today observe the diversity of ethical opinion and theories around us and accept ethical relativism; they say, for example: "When these diverse ethical opinions and theories are

observed, it becomes clear that there is no truly comprehensive theory of ethics, only a choice that is made based on your personal value system.” Everyone becomes their own god and each person worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator.

Christianity does not embrace ethical relativism; ultimately, what is right and wrong is not determined by what any of us thinks as human beings. Ultimately, God has established what is ethical and each of us is accountable to that standard.

The twisting of God’s ethical standards and the rationalization of unethical behavior is seemingly endless by sinful humans, but we must be aware that studying and reading anything written by an unbelieving secularist will have truth mixed with falsehoods. Unbelieving secularists are created in the image of God, a fact which they can never erase no matter how hard they try to suppress or twist or ignore it; thus, truth will always be *a part of* their thinking. I mention all of this to remind us that we must not be conformed to this world in how we think (Romans 12:2). So, when you read a typical news report or hear a commentator on the internet, TV, or radio, please read and listen with a discerning mind pondering whether what is espoused is in accord with the Scriptures (Acts 17:11); some of it will and some of it will not.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

“The eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth” (Proverbs 17:24).

“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4 and Deuteronomy 8:3).

“We walk by faith, not by sight” (II Corinthians 5:7).

“We are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5).