

Biblical Teachings on Marriage and Family

Definition of Ethics

Ethics is the science of morality. It is an extra-ordinary science, involving one's daily life at home, at work, everywhere. It has to do with the way people behave. In an ethics course, one studies not only human conduct but rather behaviour as it ought to be in society. It defines the distinction between right and wrong, between responsible and irresponsible behaviour.

John Murray writes:

If ethics is concerned with manner of life and behaviour, biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behaviour which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces.

The Christian faith is not man centered but God centered. God and His Word must come first. Christian ethics shows how the new man in Christ must live in the presence of God and in the power of the Spirit. Christian ethics flows out of one's relationship with God. In Christian ethics, man is considered unique. He has a special place in God's creation (Gen 1:26; Ps 8:4; Heb 2:5). He is a responsible being. Some day he has to give an account to God for all his deeds. Personal responsibility and accountability are key concepts in Christian ethics. In our age, people blame society, the environment, their genes, their upbringing, the government and organizations for their own moral failures. But on judgment day, not governments, societies or organizations will stand before God's holy throne: individuals will appear before the Lord, the Judge of all mankind. Ethics, therefore, has to do with the individual.

Ethics can never be viewed from a neutral perspective. There is none. Conduct is always judged from a particular point of view, with reference to a simple norm or ideal of right and good. The basis for norms vary greatly. One's view may be shaped by the New Age Movement, Marxism, and so on. The prevailing view is postmodernism. Symptomatic of postmodernism is its rejection of moral absolutes and its rejoicing in plurality. Your truth is your truth. My truth is my truth. This is pure relativism.

Ethics is oriented to the fact that conduct is judged, indeed should be judged, from a unique point of view, with reference to a peculiar or singular norm or ideal, the norm or ideal of the right or the good. (Henry Stob)

Underneath every system of ethics is faith – faith either in the creature or in the Creator. The Christian view of ethics is antithetical – opposed to all other views. The Christian approaches ethics from a Biblically fashioned perspective. Ethics based on Scripture is Christ-centered (Heb. 1:1,2). The norm for all behaviour then is found in God's Word

alone, not in nature or in extra-revelation. It seeks to explain the will of God as found in God's Word, and proclaimed by the Church.

The Bible – Our Norm

Biblical ethics is behaviour which, in the Scriptures, contains both normative as well as factual statements. The universal Biblical norms are absolute, and these absolute norms, properly understood, will not conflict with one another. In the Bible, God informs us of Himself and His actions. The Bible also discloses God's will for our lives. God publishes the nature of true values, shows the norm of good behaviour and sets the goal for moral strivings.

a. Christocentric

No part of the Bible fails to articulate the Saviour. Christ is found no less in James than in Romans, no less in the Old Testament than in the New, no less in the law than in the Gospels. Christ is what the Bible is about, first and last.

b. Paul and Norms

There is no gap between the Scripture written years ago and us. The apostle Paul says that the Scriptures were written for those concerned with the manner of life the Bible requires. God speaks to us through the Old and the New Testament. The Bible is our instruction. Paul's word is God's Word. Paul basis his ethical teachings on the authority of Christ. This is clearly seen in 1 Thess. 4:1,2. In vs. 1 the faithful are exhorted in the Lord Jesus Christ to love and please God, and in vs. 2 their attention is drawn to the instructions Paul had given them through the Lord Jesus. Hence ethical appeal to the hearers is grounded in the person of Christ.

c. The Law

Conduct, both corporate and individual is judged and should be judged with a reference to a singular norm of right and wrong. This norm is found in the Law of God. The law is the expression of God, a rule for action, goal and purpose of life (Ps. 119:97; Jer. 31:33; Rom. 13:10). God's law is absolutely perfect and man is sinful. God has not made His law to be broken. The psalmist said: "You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed" (Ps. 119:4). The Lord will not hold him guiltless who breaks His commands (Ex. 20:7). God is absolutely perfect and His law is the reflection of His character." Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Anything short of measuring up to the absolute perfection of the law of God is sin. So whenever God's law is broken, a person sins, for "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 2:4).

Since God is our ultimate authority, His will is therefore absolute. God has spoken, and the Bible, as the written Word of God, carries this authority. God has drawn up absolute

standards, which are always binding, irrespective of the situation. His Word transcends culture. What God has spoken applies universally to all cultures (see Philipians).

e. God

Moral norms do not change. All morality is grounded in the character, the acts, the purposes, and the instruction of God in the Bible. It is upon what God revealed in the Bible, and professed in the Christian church, that the Christian attempts to build his ethic and moral practice.

The Creeds and Confessions

We are bound by the creeds and confessions of our church. Faith is always confessional. The faith of the church gives us the fruit of the struggle of the apostles and the Reformers. When the creeds and the confessions are ignored, history is ignored. A church which is non confessional becomes a debating society.

The Family

a. Charter of Rights

By deleting express reference to the family, the Charter of Rights removed from plain view the grounds for constitutional protection of parental and family rights. This omission has contributed significantly to the demise of family autonomy and the devaluing of the family in law and legislation.

As Canadian law and policy moves from an implicitly Christian framework to an explicitly secular one, the conceptual roles and legal rights of family members are being redefined. The once implicit rights of parents to raise their children free from the undue intervention of the state has become obscured, while the individual rights of children have become a primary focus.

For example, youth have now the legal right to make sexual choices and to have equal legal access to all sexual activity. The focus of child-rights groups is too often on defending the child against authority, whether exercised by social agents or parents.

b. Changing Concept Of Marriage

A trend in which a Christian model of marriage, based on life-long commitment, self-sacrifice, self-denial and self-giving love is replaced by a model of marriage as a temporary situation which lasts only as long as one finds personal satisfaction. Too many couples view marriage primarily as an arrangement to increase their personal happiness. We live in a culture that preaches self fulfillment and self-actualization. Divorce has gained wide acceptance in our society, as seen in no fault divorce. The

social pressure to keep a marriage going if children are involved has diminished. In North America 40 to 50% of all marriages will eventually end in divorce.

c. New Definition Of The Family

Many find the traditional definition – in terms of a married couple with children – old-fashioned. Families need only to be “two or more people who care about each other. The individuals need not be related by marriage or other legal bonds, nor even be living together. What must be true of them, instead, is that they demonstrate, either tangibly or intangibly, a significant degree of mutual care or concern.” These frightening implications lack the important element of permanence. It can mean two lesbians or homosexuals living together, or a group of men or women, polygamy, or as in Tibet, one wife with several husbands.

d. Female Headed Households

Fewer and fewer households are made up of married couples. The census bureau in the U.S. estimates that more than 6 out of every 10 children born to Americans in the mid 90s will live in a single-parent home before they reach age 18. This is one of the most significant causes of poverty. It poses a tremendous problem for the single parent who has to function as family head, as mother and active member of the labour force.

e. Changes In Sexual Morals

Only five percent of 15 year olds were sexually active in 1970; today, it is close to one-third. Moreover, two decades ago just under half of all 19 year olds were sexually active; today, a whopping nine out of ten are sexually active. About three out of every ten high-school seniors have had four or more sexual partners. Cohabitation – living together without marriage increased by 740% between 1970 and 1989. If we narrow the field to adults 18-25, cohabitation skyrocketed by 1,892 percent from 1987 to 1989 – an almost twentyfold increase in just three years.

Statistics reveal that almost half of all adults under the age of 30 will live out of wedlock with someone prior to getting married. Not unexpectedly, the divorce rate among such individuals is higher than that of the general public.

More than 50% of the married men and 25% of the married women in USA have extra-marital affairs. Sexually transmitted diseases are rampant in American society, not only AIDS, but also abortion has become an epidemic.

Biblical Teachings on Marriage and Family

a. Image Bearers Of God

The distinction between two sexes is immediately related to the creation of Adam in the image of God. Both the man and the woman are equally image bearers, implying that from the beginning it was God's will that " man be not alone." " Male and female He created them" (Gen. 1: 27).

It does not mean that everyone ought to be married. The differentiation into two sexes does mean that from the beginning it was the Creator's intention that man and woman should seek each other and complement each other.

What animals perform as biological gift and instinctive function, human beings receive as a gift, a blessing, a task, an office; therefore they are responsible for the exercise of their procreative ability (Gen 1:28).

b. Marriage Has Its Roots In The Creation Order

The creation order refers to God's commandments or mandates given to man before the fall. These creation ordinances include marriage, the procreation of offspring, the replenishing of the earth, subduing the earth, dominion over the creatures, labour, the weekly sabbaths.

Gen. 2: 1-25 tells of the first wedding performed in paradise. God, like the father of the bride, brings this helper to the man, the latter sings his first love song, recognizing her as one belonging completely to him. The marriage covenant is "a divine ordinance of creation" (Gen. 2:24). This is also the authoritative interpretation of this verse given by the Lord Jesus Christ. In His discussion with the Pharisees (Mark 10:2-9; Matt.19:1-12) He not only quotes Gen. 1:27, but also Gen. 2:24, and adds: "So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10:6-9). From the beginning it was God's intention that the husband and wife unit should be insoluble and life-long.

The apostle Paul also appeals to Gen. 2:24. In 1 Cor. 6:16, he quotes the word "the two shall become one flesh," in order to repudiate the sin of prostitution and fornication. In Eph. 5:31, he quotes the greater part of the verse, but again with the emphasis on the last words: "the two shall become one flesh." This time he does it in order to emphasize why a man should love his wife and to indicate that each marriage covenant should be a model of the church's union with Christ.

The permanency, the indissolubility of the bond of marriage, and the principle of monogamy are inherent in Gen. 2:24 – companionship, one-flesh and union. It is lasting. It has a private, social and personal character. Fidelity, commitment and responsibility.

c. Old Testament Principles For Marriage

The principle of marital fidelity, the union between man and woman is to remain unbroken until one or the other spouse dies (Gen. 2:24). In Gen. 26:6-11 Isaac, fearing for his life lied about his relationship to Rebekah. Abimelech rebuked him saying “you would have brought guilt upon us”. He forbids adultery.

Moses permitted divorce but Jesus, in Matt. 19:9 gives his word on divorce “anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Proverbs 5 is totally devoted giving advice to a son to be faithful to the “wife of your youth.”

Faithfulness to God for married people includes faithfulness to each other. Again in the last book of the old testament, Mal. 2:6, “I hate divorce’ says the Lord God of Israel.” Marriage serves to illustrate the covenant relationship between Jehovah and His people.

d. New Testament Principles For Marriage

What God has joined together let not man put asunder (Gen. 2:24; Mark 10:8,9 cf.; Heb. 13:4). God will judge adultery and all sexual immorality. May either spouse take the initiative in terminating the marriage bond? Matt. 19:9 does not allow this with the exception that the spouse has committed adultery already. Marriage should end only if the non-Christian spouse insists. No explicit mention is made of re-marriage. Though re-marriage is possible, God's intention for marriage is as long as both shall live. In the New Testament, the relationship of Christ to the church is the norm and power, the source and basis of Christian marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-15).

e. Opposition To Current Trends

It is not the first time that the church opposes developments in society to guard the sanctity of the Biblical view of marriage. In the 16th and 17th century in the Netherlands, it was the church that urged the government to recognize the importance of the institution of marriage. The church admonished its members who were living together (it happened regularly in those days) to enter into an officially recognized marriage, and thus to avoid fornication. This admonition is still the calling of the church.

The only legitimate setting for intercourse is the publicly recognized marriage covenant of one man and only one woman based on love and fidelity. Christians must be strong, not only in upholding the Biblical norms, but no less strong in supporting people in their struggle to live up to these norms. We, who know of God's love in Jesus Christ, must show warmth, healing, and compassion.

f. Troth

Troth is an old English word for fidelity, truth, trust, love and commitment (Gen. 2:24). Marriage is the conjoining of two people embarking on a shared journey of expanding troth and deepening intimacy. Troth is commitment and being responsible. Caring and sharing takes time. Troth is the committed trust which invites and demands that marriage and families be affirming, forgiving and compassionate. Troth is the glue that holds parents and children together. Marriage and families equals communities of troth.

g. Definition Of Family

Family is the original cell on which all of society is built. It is a community which works together, shares its sorrows and joys, "for better and for worse." The family is a micro cosmos.

Family is the community of belonging in which we are both brought into the world and prepared for the world, the community whose birthrights are unconditional acceptance, loving care and undying support.

Family provides physical security and social values. It nurtures in words and deeds, and by recounting to children the stories of Scripture. The primary task of nurturing belongs to parents. The Biblical view is the extended family and not the nuclear family. The 10 commandments know the family as the extended family, a tree with many branches. The apostolic family is also extended and not nuclear.

The church is the new community of brothers and sisters in Christ who reflect in their relationship the dynamic relationship of Father, Son and Spirit in the Godhead. The church anticipates the coming fullness of the kingdom, when all of the old order will finally disappear (Eph. 5).

h. Principles Of Parental Nurture

The stability provided by the kind of marriage that God prescribes in the Bible is the most important part of the setting of parental nurture (Mal. 2:13-16) and for the procreation of children (See Gen. 1:28; 9:1; 15:5). Every Israelite had an intense spiritual desire to procreate children. In 1 Sam. 1–2, we learn of this intense desire and Hanna's thankfulness to God for granting her request.

In the New Testament, children are a privilege (1 Cor. 7:14). The Bible is positive about having children (Gen 1:28; Ps. 128). Marriage, intercourse and procreation belong together.

If the divine covenant is the basis and God's kingdom the goal of establishing a family, then Christians will view procreation and the raising of children as a joyful concern and a blessed task.