

Conclusion: Faith and Ethics

We have made a fairly comprehensive survey of the Christian moral life. We began by noting that human beings generally want to live good lives, and they devote a substantial amount of reflective time to thinking about how to do that. They set goals for themselves, so that their energies and talents will not be wasted. They want to accomplish things that are part of the good life they are seeking, and they make plans and choices that they expect to get them to their goals.

These goals are as varied as the people who set them. There is no single ideal for a good life that fits all people. There does not even seem to be a single ideal of the Christian life that fits everyone who is seeking a good life in the context of Christian beliefs and commitments.

But people do learn some things from experience that shape and limit the goals they pursue. They learn early that what seems good at the moment does not always make for a good life over the long run. Goals have to be set with a whole life in mind, even if that means giving up some of the things we want and making substantial sacrifices along the way to reach the goals that are really important. People also learn that the goals they seek are bound up with the lives of other people. At first, they may think this means only that they have to adjust what they want so they will have the cooperation of other people in their efforts to get it, but the real links between human lives and goals lie deeper than that. Our happiness, we find, depends on the good lives of some other people, so that we cannot live a good life if their lives are not good. We discover that there is greater satisfaction in achieving goals that develop talents in us that other people recognize. We learn that the good things we create are more valuable to us when they are also valued by others. Thus, as we put together a good life for ourselves, we find that this good life ties us to all sorts of other people in many different ways. We find ourselves

living in covenant with others, pursuing shared commitments that become more important to us than purely personal goals. At some point we may even find that there are some goals that are so important that we would be willing to sacrifice our lives to make it possible for others to have the good we are seeking.

The ways we share our lives and goals with other people are very important; but much of what we do to live a good life has to be negotiated among people with whom we do not have close personal relationships and, indeed, among those with whom we have varying degrees of disagreement and conflict. The search for a good life under these conditions requires us not only to think about our goals, but also to arrive at some rules that will govern how we pursue those goals. Rules set limits. They tell us what we may not do in order to achieve a goal, so that we do not simply use other people as a way to get what we want. They tell us what we have to respect about other people and their goals, whether or not we think that those people have good lives and whether or not we judge their goals to be worthy.

Rules are so central to ethics that many people think the subject consists of little else. The history of Christian ethics offers several different ways of conceiving these rules. Rules may be understood as God's commandments, or they may be regarded as laws that are built into the way that nature works, or they may be interpreted as part of a covenant we make with God and with other people. Each understanding provides a measure of objectivity for moral rules. We cannot change them to suit ourselves, and we cannot set them aside with the excuse that the goals we are pursuing are so important that the rules do not matter. Because rules have this objectivity, we tend to come back to them at points of conflict and uncertainty in the moral life. Rules tell other people what they can expect from us; and when we are in doubt, they can tell us what we ought to expect of ourselves.

Nevertheless, a moral life built on rules alone would hardly qualify as a good life. We need the limits that rules set only because we also have goals, purposes that we follow across a lifetime with real commitment. It is the way we strike the balance between rules and goals that shapes our moral life and makes us the kind of people we are.

Virtues are the third main element in the moral life, along with rules and goals. Virtues provide the vocabulary in which we describe ourselves and other people morally. Virtues vary a great deal over time, of course. We would hardly recognize some of the virtuous types that Aristotle describes as good people. They would seem to us pompous, self-important, and rude. Indeed, we have a hard enough time appreciating some of the virtues that were admired a generation or two back in our own culture. Yet there are some virtues that seem to persist. They

take different forms in different people, but we recognize that they are important because they are the habits of choice and action on which the rest of the moral life depends. Classical and Christian traditions together have identified four of these cardinal virtues: temperance, courage, prudence, and justice. Christian writers have also noted that there are some virtues that are particularly important to the Christian life that come to us as God's gifts rather than as habits acquired by practice. Borrowing from the three abiding realities named in 1 Corinthians 13, Christian ethics has named these theological virtues as faith, hope, and love.

Reflection on virtue reminds us that living a good life is not just making a series of good decisions about following the rules and choosing our goals. Living a good life involves becoming a certain kind of person. We could imagine someone who lived a life always on the edge of intemperance, usually fearful in the face of challenge, and often leaning toward pursuit of inappropriate or unjust goals, but who nevertheless managed more often than not to do the right thing. Would we say that this unlikely character was leading a good life? Probably not. Living a good life, it seems, involves becoming a person with qualities that allow others to depend on you to make the right choices. Perhaps even more important, it involves qualities that allow you to depend on yourself in that way too.

Virtue, whether acquired by practice or received as a gift, has to be lived out over a lifetime. So thinking about virtue inevitably leads us on to further reflection about the families and communities that support good lives and give us an opportunity to see virtue in action. We need an intimate community of love and acceptance where we know we will find support, even when life is hard and our attempts to live it well fall short. We need to be part of a community that gives us a clear identity and shows us who we are and what makes us different from others. But we also need to be part of a community that will challenge us to extend our vision to include new people and to live our virtues in new ways. For Christians, both identity and challenge are often to be found in the church, and we have considered three kinds of churches that support the Christian moral life in different ways: the ecumenical church, the confessional church, and the missional church. Or perhaps we should say that these three are different aspects of life in the church, since each meets a need that Christians trying to live a good life in today's world sometimes have and every real church will have to minister to all three of those needs at one time or another.

Christians, however, are not shaped only by their church community. They live in a society that includes many different, interrelated institutions; and their understandings of the good life inevitably include what they have learned through their participation in this wider society.

Theology in the twentieth century has usually affirmed this participation as a way to learn what God requires of us and has resisted the tendency in parts of Christian history to reject society and seek a way to live apart from its demands. But twentieth-century theology has also been realistic enough to warn that participation in society tempts us to confuse the prejudices of our culture with the requirements of our faith. We need a keen eye for our own interests and the interests of others if we are going to make judgments about how a society should support the good life for its people. Christians, especially, must be alert to the needs of those who lack the power to press their own interests and whose voices may be silenced by the power of others. Social transformation will not be accomplished as easily or as completely as some Christians believed it could be at the beginning of the twentieth century, but concern for the issues that shape society is an important part of the Christian moral life nonetheless.

That is the Christian moral life as we have seen it in these pages. Of course, the problem is that our experience of it never flows in the neat, sequential order suggested by this outline. Logically, we may begin with goals in order to make rules and follow rules in order to acquire virtues. But our reflection on the moral life always begins somewhere in the middle, when a new challenge disrupts our personal goals or calls our familiar virtues into question. Indeed, our reflection on the moral life very often begins precisely when we realize that we have failed at it in some important way—when we see that we have been pursuing the wrong goals, when we have failed to live up to a covenant commitment, when we have not had the courage to do what we know we should do.

We do not begin reflecting on the moral life by opening the textbook to page 1 and proceeding in order through the lessons. It is in the nature of ethics that we are always already living the subject when we start to think about it.

It is important to understand that our faith intersects our ethics there, in the midst of life. Too often we think about faith and ethics in a way that locates faith at the beginning or at the end of the system. It is supposed that those who have faith in God receive a clear set of commandments at the outset, so that the moral life becomes a simple matter of doing what we have been told. Or it is supposed, all too simply, that faith in God means belief in a judge who will add up our moral accomplishments at the end, then give us the reward or punishment that we deserve.

Ideas like that make it hard for non-Christians to take the Christian moral life seriously. It seems to them as if we are not trying to live good lives at all, but merely trying to follow a set of rules in hopes of winning some ultimate reward. Perhaps worse, ideas like that make it hard for Christians to understand why their lives include moments of confusion

and failure, and hard for them to see that the Christian life also includes freedom, choice, and love.

Christian faith, however, offers a relationship between God and the moral life quite different from the one that so many people imagine. God meets us not only as lawgiver and as judge, but also and primarily as the gracious One who accepts us despite our failure to live up to what the moral life requires of us, and who restores our hope for the future despite our inability to take back what we have already done or make up for what we have failed to do in the past. We encounter this gracious God not at the beginning of our systematic thinking about ethics, but precisely in the pain and confusion of actual moral life. If we accept the grace God offers, we are freed from the weight of our past and our hope is restored. If we refuse it, our moral life is apt to become a self-deceptive exercise in justifying our mistakes and blaming our failures on others. Or we may slide into the despair of moral failure, unable to undo the wrong we have done and without hope for the future. Only a gracious God keeps our actual moral life from becoming a constant measurement of ourselves against a standard we can never meet, anticipating a dreadful judgment we can never escape.

That does not mean that there is no law or judgment in Christian ethics. People have misunderstood God's grace in that way ever since some told Paul that their response to the gospel would be to continue in sin so that grace may abound (Rom 6:1). It does mean, however, that the Christian moral life is not one long preparation for a judgment that lies ahead of us. Judgment has already happened. We know that as soon as we begin to reflect honestly on the life we have already lived. Because that judgment is covered by grace, we are free to reorient our moral lives toward the future rather than continually reviewing the failures of the past. We are free to understand the lives and needs of others, to build relationships and share commitments with them rather than being tied to constant reexamination of ourselves.

When we encounter a gracious God in the midst of actual moral life, that life becomes our own, probably for the very first time. We need no longer live it according to someone else's pattern, but we can find the goals and virtues that allow us to live a good life in our own situation, with the abilities and limitations that we actually have. We are free to live by the rules and commitments that make a good life possible, instead of trying to justify ourselves to someone else, by someone else's rules. So the moral life, instead of being a way to defend ourselves, becomes a way to love our neighbors and a way to love God as well.