

Pauline Ethics Lecture #1

Theological and Cultural Considerations

Paul's ethics are derived from his extant writings, all of which are classed as Holy Scripture. The understanding of his ethics poses, therefore, some special problems.

First, we seek in scripture for solutions to all sorts of questions of personal and institutional morality with which Paul himself was not concerned. Thus the authoritative nature of Paul's writings can interfere with our hearing what he has to say to us -- for we can be too busy posing questions from our own minds and our own age to hear the questions Paul posed for himself and his age. If we wish Paul's own questions to develop meaning for us we must listen to his agenda rather than seeking our own in him.

Second, when posing a modern moral question to Paul one frequently seems to find the exact answer one is looking for. Paul's letters have all too frequently become a quarry from which are cut theological arguments useful for lambasting one's opponents. As Arthur Darby Nock says in his work St. Paul,

"The words and concepts with which Paul faced the situations of his life and mission have become charged with the dogmatic controversies of later generations. In particular, the significance which some of his writings (and above all the Epistle to the Romans) had for Martin Luther, causes us to read some of his work with later issues near the surface of our minds."

The recent debates in the Episcopal Church about the ordination of women, sexual morality, and the nature of priesthood and ministry are all painful examples of this disrespectful diversion of Paul from the preaching of his Gospel about Christ to the shoring up of contemporary prejudices. Special interest pleading is a dangerous use of scripture.

Third, there may be a considerable danger of over analyzing Paul. Everything he wrote he wrote to deal with concrete situations occurring in churches with which he associated. In the few cases, as with the Letter to the Romans, where there is sustained theological argument, he is responding to the major theological questions of his own day, phrased in the terms of his own day. As Morna Hooker says in the introduction to her work A Preface to Paul,

"One wonders what Paul might have written, had he known that after generations of Christians were going to hang on his words, and armies of research students analyze every tense and case that he used. Apart from Romans, Paul's letters were written to congregations who knew him and who had heard him preach; they were to fill in the gaps in their understanding of the gospel rather than start from the beginning. Reading them is rather like sitting in on a tutorial when a teacher goes over an essay with an undergraduate; there are some favorable comments on what has been well understood, but most of our time and attention is concentrated on points which have been misunderstood and mistakes which need to be put right. Trying to build up a picture of Paul's theology, then, is like trying to make a picture out of dots, such as one finds in children's drawing books; but in this case, we have not been supplied with any numbers to tell us the order in which to join the dots, and the resulting picture is somewhat distorted. We have only a sample of what Paul thought, and we do not know how representative that sample is."

So in this class I want to go one step behind the question, "What did Paul believe about priesthood, or sexual morality, or the involvement of Christians in politics or any other particular moral issue." I want to look at the ground or justification of this ethics as a whole. The question is, "What is the nature of God revealed in Christ such that some acts, beliefs, intentions are good and others are not?" What makes an act a good act?

In the very form of that first question the fundamental attitude of Paul toward the ethical becomes clear. The ethical is grounded in the nature of God. Therefore, for Paul, the realm of ethical actions not a self-sufficient, self-regulating one where we make decisions in accordance with or in opposition to a fixed eternal law passively embedded in the nature of things. The very possibility of ethical action is not something we create by ourselves but is one given to us by God. Ethical action is not something we do through the power of our own reason to make a pathway toward the divine. It becomes a possibility only because God actively gives the possibility to us in giving us himself in Christ.

Now, before we explore what all of that means, which will be next weeks lecture, let's look at the ethical structures of the ancient world to which Paul spoke. To really understand Paul's ethics, we must start with some understanding of the context in which he worked, the problems he faced in attempting to communicate his ideas and the conflicts with which he had to deal, conflicts generated in communities in which he worked by the mix of cultures, religions, and values that characterized the

Eastern end of the Mediterranean in the mid first century.

First, the gods and goddesses of Olympus, the one's we think of when someone speaks of Roman or Greek mythology, were dead. Their temples still existed and sacrifices were still offered to them, but their names lacked the power to move either individual people or whole societies. They had no appreciable religious influence in the first century and the morals they had earlier represented or failed to represent are irrelevant to this discussion. The Athens of Pericles was not the Rome of Nero in any way, religion included. So we may dismiss Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, and the rest of that crew. Personal attachment to any god at all, as an deity having significant personal or individual relationships with a worshiper, was pretty much confined to the lower classes and then the god honored was generally some new (to the Latin West) eastern deity into which the Romans had come in contact during the expansion of their empire, culture and commerce into the anciently civilized lands of the Near-East.

Indeed, in so far as there were personal gods at all in the first century world they were generally syncretistic products of classical gods and Egyptian, Babylonian or other non-classical deities. Such syncretism was characteristic of the age, when, with the exception of the Jews, there was little sense of exclusiveness between deity and deity.

The second characteristic of individual gods during the first century was that they were gods of personal salvation. Such deities were a clear response to the loss of personal importance and sense of meaning experienced as the smaller and more manageable world of the polis gave way to the huge empires of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds with inaccessible emperors, military control, secret police and changes in policy in which the ordinary person had no influence and, indeed, no voice. If personal security be not available in this world, then perhaps in the next. If our meaning as individual human beings is threatened by forces beyond our control in this world, then perhaps, in the next our worth will be justified.

For the educated classes, Greek philosophy filled a religious role, It aimed at guiding and forming human life so that it was fundamentally ethical -- and doing so in line with certain conceptions of the nature of the world as it really is rather than the world as it merely seems to be. To form one's life according to reality rather than myth would give to human beings a security they could not get any other way -- even if the reality was a rather stern one, as in Stoicism. Thus the key ethical concept for the first century Greek and those influenced by his thought was "nature." The inner principles by which all things were structured and which inhered in all things would

determine the proper content of human life and action.

One lived according to nature and consequently in harmony with the observable phenomena of the world and of human life. To be ethical was thus to discover the qualities inherent in things, their natures, and live so as not to violate or press these inherent qualities.

For example, Plato says that all men seek the good. So to act toward others as if they weren't seeking the good, but in fact desire evil would be to act contrary to their nature -- and would be unethical to the right thinking first century Greek.

To the Greek or Roman, the divine, god, was the reason why these inherent qualities were as they were. In fact, and this is a very important point, the Greek idea of god was exhausted in accounting for the world as one found it. The point is well illustrated by Diogenes Laertius,

The end of life is to act in conformity with nature, that is, at once with the nature which is in us and with the nature of the Universe....Thus the life according to nature is that virtuous and blessed flow of existence, which is enjoyed only by one who always acts so as to maintain the harmony between the power (daemon) within the individual and the will of the power that orders the Universe."

Therefore, ethics for the Greek thinker could never be the utterly new response to a unique historical act of God. God, for the Greek mind, did not perform unique historical acts but accounted for the unity of the world; for the fact that the cycles of nature repeat themselves in an orderly fashion; for the fact that things hang together. This sense of order and unity included order and unity in the realm of human ethical action. For the Jew and especially for the Christian the origin of ethical norms was in the freely willed act of God. Moral rules were for the Greek an expression of God's inherent necessary nature; for the early Christian, they were an expression of God's will, of his freely chosen aims.

This distinction between Greek and Christian shows up many times in Paul. In Romans 3:24 God's action of justification of sinners in Christ is a free act, something that cannot be taken for granted. The natural can be taken for granted, free action cannot. The free nature of God's action is manifest when thanks rather than acceptance is felt to be an appropriate response to it. (Romans 12:1a)

It makes no sense to thank a person (or a god) for doing something when they cannot do otherwise, and Greek gods could not

do otherwise, they had to follow their natures.

This distinction between ethical norms coming from God's will and ethical norms coming from the inherent nature of things is important because the Greek vision cannot include the possibility that God's aim is the radical change of persons and even societies in a new and inward way. For the Greek, moral action could only develop that which in some way he already was. The Christian could become something very different, even opposed to what he was at any given time. Therefore, hope has a place in Christian morals it could never have in the rest of the ancient world. When a person changed his behavior from evil to good the Greeks could only assert that he had, in some sense, been good all along, but that it had been hidden. The Christian could affirm that a true change in the nature of the person had taken place, that what had once been basically evil had become basically good.

Conversely, Paul's sense that the whole of every person's life is misdirected and subject to sin was a new and especially distasteful idea to ancient people because it meant that there was no salvation in the development of their own natures. For Paul, there is no divine spark in human beings the careful nurture of which would lead us to God unless God himself chooses to give us a part of himself.

To give a flavor of what is coming: For Paul, the fact that God is free means that the basis of human ethical life cannot be knowledge about God or about his words and messages or even about the laws he has given us at times in the past. This knowledge is important but not sufficient. For Paul, ethical life must be a life of continuing relation to God, enabling a continuous response on our part to God's new acts in history and the new things he is calling us to do. That is why it is so important that nothing, as Paul says in Romans 8, can separate us from the love of God. Ultimately, nothing can break or destroy that life of continuing relation to God out of which we develop our ethical lives.

Oddly enough, the very repetition of the Christian celebration of Sunday pointed, in the early church, to God's continuous relation to the church. It was felt to be necessary to renew and review that conversation frequently. To pagans, such frequent celebrations were startling.

So when God calls us to ethical living, it is not just to do the same old things over and over again, but to a new response based on the new things and the new challenges He brings to us daily. In plainer language, prayer, meaning the conversation with God, both speaking and listening, is essential for Christian

ethical life. This includes life in the church, the reception of sacraments, and all other aspects of life where the Holy Spirit is present and active. These, collectively, are all ways of keeping our communication with God current and, therefore, alive to the possibility that He may ask us to do something we had never thought of doing before. That is what is at stake when Paul proclaims the basis of our ethical life to be God's freely given gift of himself in Christ, and not the law, or God's past messages to us. To again quote Nock:

... he (Paul) is filled with the idea of the positive creative activity of Christ within the individual soul and within the community of souls. This community of souls in the Church had for Paul an aspect which is somewhat different from that which it wore in the eyes of the Jerusalem community. Christ and the Spirit were everything; unlimited deference could be shown to the older disciples as a matter of charity, but no obedience could be yielded to them as a matter of authority. Jerusalem could claim respect and grateful benefaction, but not obedience. ...

So one great gulf between Paul and those to whom he preached was that between the Christian God, free to will new things, free to create; and the god of the pagans, bound to the cycles of nature and human life, explaining the origin of things but not the originality within things.

The second great gulf is that for the Greek mind salvation was a process of growth or education which gave the rational part of the being ever more centrality and the physical and non-rational parts ever less. But for Paul, the human being is a unity no part of which is immune from sin or beyond salvation. Hence, the physical body is ethically important because it has an everlasting aspect, bound up in a positive way in the process of salvation. For the Greek, the body was ethically important because it was a drag on the soul's finding its true place as mind or spirit. Paul valued the physical because he assumed that it was apart of the whole being of a person; that one could meet God as much in the body as in any other state. Most Greeks would have said that to meet the divine one had to surpass the body.

So when Paul is preaching to the Gentiles, there are these two main points that made him difficult to understand: 1) God is free and 2) Both the mind and the body are positively involved in salvation. Paul himself was aware of this conflict between his thought and that of Greek philosophy. 1 Corinthians 1-3 is an extended discussion of the contrasts between himself and Greek philosophy. The cross is God's foolishness, freely chosen by Him to accomplish his purpose. The body is resurrected although Paul

does not want to commit himself to an exact description of what the resurrection body will be like.

Alongside these two major points, there are several others that separate the philosophical basis of Paul's ethical thinking from that of the pagan world. For the Greek, the divine did not provide a transcendent viewpoint from which the happenings of this world could be evaluated according to their ethical content. One of the glories of Christianity is that in the revelation of a transcendent God we have a means that brings all earthly institutions, movements and acts to judgement in relation to that transcendence. This God is a living one. Earthly institutions, movements and acts are not judged by an impersonal, necessary and natural law, but by a God who chooses, loves and demands. Whether the church accepts the freedom and responsibility to use this insight is, of course, another question.

Thus the Hebrew prophets criticized the state, the economic order they lived in and practically every element of society in the name of Yahweh the one God and the only legitimate origin of ethical norms. Paul could do this too, and he denied the ultimacy before God of the most deeply ingrained of social distinctions and the most universal of human institutions. He is so radical it is scary. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus..." (Galatians 3:28)

One will look in vain for this sort of radical social criticism in the philosophers of the classical tradition. Why? Let's start with a quote from the Greek playwright Menander.

"Whatever is more powerful than man, he takes to be his god."

Therefore, any expression of power or marked individuality deserved respect and perhaps worship. This is characteristic of the polytheistic mind of the ancient world. Hence, the dividing line between the divine and the human worlds was hazy. Men could be elevated to the status of gods and the gods could act very like men. At first, this seems strange to us, but it is more common than is usually admitted. There are lots of things, political systems, charismatic leaders, business institutions, that claim our trust and allegiance. Some of them claim that we should devote our lives to them. When they lay a claim to our services for their sake rather than for ours, they have become gods in the same sense as those of ancient Greece and Rome. But they are not gods of utter ethical transcendence. It is still possible to be a polytheist because it is still possible to submit our lives to powers greater than we; powers that claim the right to form and mold our lives beyond our ability to say yes or

no. In this sense this century has seen several men who have claimed divine power, and we have all suffered for it.

In the ancient world, there was little sense of exclusiveness among the various gods. It was a tolerant, live and let live, situation. After all, there were obviously many different powers active in one's life, and it was probably wise to pay attention to several of them.

The Greek mind recognized, at least theoretically, that all these powers might be expressions of a fundamental unity. But it could never quite move to strict monotheism because of its tolerance for different gods. The Jews were at one and the same time admired for their monotheism and despised for their lack of tolerance. Their morality was respected but the claim of the one transcendent God upon their lives that was the basis for that morality was despised.

For, although it seems strange, in the minds of most educated people of the ancient world, Christianity was not a religion. The ancient pagan sources charge Christians with atheism and also, consequently, with the fact that their strange beliefs and customs undermine the order and stability of society. Fantastic to us, perfectly sensible to an ancient Roman. For him, religion meant to pay due respect to the gods according to tradition. To claim only one power worthy of worship and even more to claim that the chief manifestation of that power was of recent rather than ancient origin meant to reject the whole cultural concept of the divine in the pagan world.

It was then, impossible for a single consistent ethical code to ground itself in this multitude of gods and powers. The ethical norms of the ancient world were set not by the gods but by loyalty to the state and to the family. Worship of the gods was part of being ethical, but the gods were not the originators of ethical norms. To worship the gods was to express loyalty to the family and the state and, therefore, to the accepted ethical system. Consequently, the Christian's refusal to do so was seen as a threat to the ethical stability of both.

Since religion and worship were expressions of loyalty to state and family, there was no ground in religion for the criticism of those institutions. One could and did criticize their present operations in the name of their own past traditions -- a failure to live up to the example of the fathers -- or one could criticize if the laws of nature were being ignored. One never criticized in the name of the transcendent and future oriented claims of the gods because the gods did not make such claims. Such claims did not exist.

When Paul discusses freedom from the principalities and powers of the world, a freedom that the Christian was supposed to enter into, he is talking about freedom from the limited view of the place of the gods held by most ancient people. State and family were, for Paul, important and powerful, but not divine, and they could be criticized in the name of the aims of God. For the early Christian this was felt as a great freedom.

In summary, there were at least three ethically significant differences between the foundational propositions assumed by Paul and those of the polytheistic world to which he preached.

1. Paul's vision of God was one of a free god, transcending nature and not trapped in it and, therefore, capable of making absolutely unique ethical demands on any of his followers. The normal classical view saw god as the reason for the structures of nature, and ethics consequently as a matter of obedience to tradition and to established norms, not to the call of God.

2. The reason for the ethical use of the body for Paul was that the body was part of the human being and, therefore, has an everlasting significance. It is part of our eternal salvation. For the Greeks, ethical action relating to the body was to control it and prevent its desires from interfering with the rational element in us.

3. The transcendence of Paul's God gave the Christians a standpoint from which they could criticize all earthly institutions, including some viewed as divine or potentially divine by the rest of the ancient world. Because for the Greek the gods were expressions of the powers of the state and family and nature, they could provide no grounds from which these institutions might be criticized.

The final difference, to which all these differences contribute, is that for Paul the future was open and God could act creatively in it. Ethics consisted of our response to God's acts. For the pagan the gods could do nothing really new, and ethics was a molding of oneself to the best of the old order.