

CHAPTER VIII

CONDUCT IN THE WORLD

The Ethical Impact of the Gospel

What we do matters. Our conduct is extremely important as Jesus made known by the saying of Matthew. 7:21: Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who *does the will of my Father* who is in heaven. Now, recalling that the will of the Father is summed up in one thing only as explained above, that we turn our hearts heavenward and away from life in this world, doing his will must likewise be judged according to the ultimate motivation of our hearts. Do we seek treasure on earth or in heaven? What is our ultimate motive? Do we seek to gain something that will enhance the life of this world, or are we solely motivated by the unalloyed desire for life in the Father's house? That is the only issue; that is the only scale by which our deeds are weighed for good or evil.

Our responses to situations that threaten our lives will reveal the real character of our motivations and the treasure of our hearts. Therefore, Jesus defined the issue in these extreme cases by his hard commandments in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere:

- Do not resist one who is evil.
- Love your enemies.
- Of him who takes away your goods, do not ask them again.
- Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.
- Do not fear him who is able to destroy the body and after that has no more that he can do!

Ethics have to do with one's morality and integrity. The ethical, or rather the unethical, usually comes into the play where conduct, while legal and sometimes even apparently honorable, is nevertheless motivated by self-interest at the expense of others. It is essentially devoid of bad consequences and may even result in high honors for the perpetrator. For example, if I knowingly publish, as my own work, ideas I have gleaned from the writings of others, without giving due credit, I have been unethical. My work may receive high honors; I may be lauded for my wonderful insight, but I am involved in conduct where dishonesty prevails because I hope to add to my laurels in this life. We see therefore that the ultimate motivation for this unethical conduct, indeed for all unethical conduct, is the love of life, which is condemnation.

To use a specific example, Martin Luther King was accused of committing plagiarism by incorporating the work of others into his doctoral theses without giving credit. If true, this was an unethical action that nevertheless brought him honor, the awarding of a doctoral degree by a prominent institution of higher learning. Thus, unethical action always is motivated by a desire for gain in the context of this life, and it involves a breach of one's personal integrity. Therefore, who ever follows Jesus in taking up his own cross has not the slightest inclination to act in an unethical way; the usual motivations do not tempt.

Freedom and the Fear of Death

The freedom that I have called to mind above, the freedom to love our enemies and freedom from anxiety for today's demands, all this is the freedom promised by Jesus in saying:

If you abide in my word, then are you truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free (John 8:31,32).

It is, at the most superficial level, the freedom to respond to any circumstance with integrity, honesty and love for our neighbors and for God without fear of consequences. At its deepest level it becomes complete freedom from the fear of death. Loss of life would be the most severe consequence of our actions, just as it was for Jesus. The thought here as to the significance of the work of Jesus has been most precisely stated by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews in the passage cited above in discussing the ransom (Hebrews. 2:14,15).

The Great Anti-corollary

I find that the Great Corollary, defined as the Great Commandment/Great Principle, or love of God/hatred of life corollary, has its counterpart, a sort of Great Anti-corollary, the love of life/hatred of death corollary. These paired entities are soul mates and can never be parted the one from the other, and the devil rushes to take advantage of us by imposing his will on us through bondage to the fear of death. Being delivered from that fear by Jesus, we are liberated from the shackles of the devil and can approach the questions of our existence on our own terms, free of any bondage.

I am speaking here of that which men call death, which is the termination of our association with flesh and blood. But while we remain in bondage to this fear we are nevertheless victims of the most awful death. This is the death to the Father mentioned by Jesus in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, who was dead to the Father for so long as he remained devoted to life in the far country. This entire world is the realm of the dead, of whom Jesus spoke when he said,

The hour has come, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live (John 5:25).

Conclusion

This discussion of conduct that is acceptable to the Father has been brief. It is only necessary to point to the essential principle. Apart from this Great Principle there is no point in discussing conduct that is pleasing to God. In its light there is again little need for discussion because of the simplicity of its application. There, in that light, all questions are resolved including those arising out of Jesus' hard sayings and his most difficult commandments. This includes all questions of conduct involving war, wealth, politics and family. Instead of saying, "Surely, he could not have meant for us to literally do that?" we respond, "Of course. It's obvious, isn't it?" Nevertheless, for you who insist on more discussion, I refer you to Chapter 12 of my earlier book, "Jesus: the Rock of Offense."