

On The Pursuit Of The Good:

Preface:

People of God!

Last week we started a new message series that seeks to make sense of the world right now, so that we can make wise, faithful decisions about how to live well. We talked about the complexities of the world around us, of our tendency to fight, flee, or freeze, rather than act with a healthy response to whatever comes our way. I side-stepped the topic of worldviews, and instead focused on just how angry we are with those who are, for all intents and purposes, exactly like us--except we disagree about something we feel is important, and wish they'd just go away because they're so wrong. I challenged us to think about who we hate the most, and make friends with people who are so much like us, but hold some different practice or belief about some particular thing. It was a lot to do in 20 minutes.

Today:

Today's message is on the pursuit of the good. The pursuit of the good.

So we're going to talk about what is good, and how we pursue it. And, frankly, we're going to cover things that we all know. I've talked about them , we've talked about them

at length in Adult Ed. Practically nothing this morning is “new stuff” for any of us. But it's no trouble for me to share the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for us all.

Let me first point out: Whatever else we hear or see or read about in the world right now, we're being demanded to act on it. We're being constantly persuaded and propagandized. It may be persuaded toward the good; the propaganda may be for wonderful things. But what you hear on the radio or see in your feed is asking you to do something: believe something, buy something, say--or type or shout or call--something. Despair or hope, prayer or abandonment, obsess or ignore. We're being called to respond to things. That never goes away, unless we take the radical, counter-cultural step of distancing ourselves from these siren-like calls.

And much of our time is spent reacting, rather than acting, right? But I want us to be able to choose what's good, and act that way, rather than react in whatever we've been primed to react.

Making that choice is what we're talking about today. First, let's pray.

Prayer:

Defining then Choosing then Acting:

To talk about the good at all, much less its pursuit, is to talk about ethics.

An ethic--singular--is a person or a group's system of defining and choosing between right and wrong. And everyone has one, whether they realize it or not. Ethics are complicated; developing a consistent ethic takes work and time.

For this morning, let's remember that an ethic is a person or a group's system of defining and choosing between right and wrong, good and bad, and then acting on that choice.

Assumptions:

And I'll assume that for Christians the Bible will be a source of ethics, somehow. I'll also just take it for granted that we believe that we think that having an "ethic" matters, that we want to be on the side of "right" instead "wrong," and live accordingly.

Some Typical Answers:

There are three typical ways people figure out what is right and wrong in the world. If we were to take a sampling, we'd find that each one of us leans toward these in various situations or just all the time. (Cf. what follows: Fedler, 2006, 6ff.)

Rule Ethics:

First way, first framework: Rule Ethics. This understanding of ethics answer the question "What am I supposed to do?" The "supposed to" comes from some rule that someone has laid out. Rule Ethics are oriented toward duty and obedience. Someone or something says "this is how you should behave," and to do good is to follow the rule.

This framework is oriented toward obedience or disobedience, right? What's "good" in this framework, is obedience. To do what the rule says is to make a "good" choice, and be "in the right."

When you're a kid, your whole ethical framework is driven by "rule ethics." And you don't get to make those rules up. "Why should I?" is always followed by someone else's "Because I said so." Rule ethics are not nuanced. They are black and white: obedience or disobedience. Obey, follow the rule, and be "right and good," or disobey, break the rule, and be "wrong and bad." These are Rule Ethics.

Those Christians that think what we really should do with ourselves is follow the Ten Commandments, they are living by a Rule Ethic.

There are also result or "Ends Ethics."

Ends Ethics:

"Ends Ethics" focus on the results of our actions. What are the results? If we are directed by an End Ethic we tend to determine whether something is right or wrong by it's end result. This does pose a few problems, because for most of what we do, we can only see the immediate consequences

it may have, right? The immediate result? "Sex feels great, it must be good! Let's do it! That's shiny, let's buy it! That tastes good, let's eat it!"

A major problem with ends ethics is that we by and large perceive "right" and "good" as "right and good for me, now!" We often just don't consider deeply enough the consequences, or ends, of our actions. And it takes a lot of mental work for us to live our lives by an ends ethic, because you are going to be thinking about every single possibility that the result of your actions might have. We can justify all sorts of evil by saying it'll be good in the end.

The phrase "You can't make an omelet without cracking a few eggs," is an Ends Ethic frame. What matters is the omelet not the eggs you crack on the way. Good and Right depend on the end goal, not the means to get there.

How to cause a fight: Step one

And so we can see how easy it is to get into a fight about something where there's strong feelings about "right" and "wrong." If you're an "ends ethics" person, talking about war, or illegal immigration, or environmental issues, or your mutual fund, or political things with someone who is a "rules ethics" person, perspectives are going to differ.

Think about Robin Hood: The "ends ethic" person says it's good to give to the poor; Robin Hood is a hero! The "rules ethic" person says stealing is against the law, and Merry Robin is a lousy thief. Neither person realizes that they are operating with different ethical frameworks. They both just decide to consider the other person a fool or a problem.

I've been both people. And part of the problem is that many of us don't have a unified ethic; we bounce between ends ethics in one area of our lives, and rules ethics in another. This gets messy, right? We end up in a personal civil war, trying to justify to ourselves all sorts of behavior that doesn't match because our operating assumptions don't match, can't line up. We lose all integrity.

But there is a more excellent way.

Virtue Ethics & "How Should I be?"

There's another sort of ethic we can have that can inform the ways we define and choose between what's right and what's wrong. This is called "Virtue Ethics."

Rule ethics directs us to focus on the actions themselves. Is this right or wrong? Well, if the rule says do it, and I do it, then it's right, and I'm a good-doer, or a do-gooder.

Ends ethics directs us to think about the consequences and end results of our actions, and so our actions--the things we do--become "good" or "right" depending on if the consequences are good or right. And good and right are defined almost entirely in self-interested ways.

Virtue ethics asks us to focus not on the consequences--though they are important--not on the actions--though those are important: but on the actor: the person acting. On you.

Virtue ethics calls for the development of a consistently "good" character, a consistently "right" way of living in the world. And character is more than "actions"--it is all the emotions we have and the things we think and all that

stuff that makes up a person, some of which is seen as we interact with people, some of which is private.

We ask ourselves: "How should I be? No matter what moral quandary the world tosses at me, no matter what rules are there to help me make decisions: How should I be, all the time, regardless of the situation at hand?"

And we New Creation people, we are meant to be like Christ. "Examine yourselves," Paul tells us, "to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed you fail to meet the test." We're encouraged, "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24) or "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (5:1-2a).

Jesus is our Virtue Ethic:

We are to become like Jesus. We are not supposed to have just any sort of character; we are not supposed to live in just any sort of way, or "be" just anybody. Following Rules is not our basis for doing good; making choices based on some self-interested end is not our basis for doing good. We are supposed to be people who are just like Jesus, from the shallowest, most surface thing, to the depths of our souls.

We are supposed to not simply live with a virtue ethic, but a virtue ethic that is based entire on Jesus, his character,

his virtue, his life.

Rules aren't bad, they just aren't good enough. There aren't enough of them, and they don't touch our insides. Consequences are important: they just aren't more important than becoming and living like Jesus.

To make good Christian choices is to be like Christ, directed by a virtue ethic that has Jesus at its center. And that takes so much work. And if we take seriously this Biblical call to be like Jesus, we are not going to look like a typical church looks, or act like typical Christians act. Because typical Christians value "being nice" over "being like Christ," and typical Churches value "being presentable" over "being like Christ."

Work:

But it's a lot easier to say, "Gimme the rules!" And then just follow them Isn't it? Don't break the law. It's a little more difficult to say: will the end result of this be "good" somehow?" Because there are so many things to figure out--good when? Now? In 2018? Whose good--mine? Yours? Some child worker far away? It gets tricky. But it's immensely more difficult to ask ourselves, "What do I have to do to become like Jesus in any given situation." Any situation.

To focus our concern on developing a character like Jesus, today, right now, in our cars on the way home, with our time later this afternoon, in the mornings when we are in traffic...that's just more difficult.

How?

We have resources: the Bible, the community of faith, the Holy Spirit--these things help us in our quest to be people, and a group of people, who are becoming more like Jesus.

If the church is anything, it's one long improv class, training us not to be clever and witty and snarky, but to respond to the situations we find ourselves in like Jesus would.

And we know Jesus, right? We know about him. He prized obedience to God, doing only what his father did, saying only what his father told him to say. His character was shaped by obedience to God, the God who is love, love defined by Jesus, as any selfless work that turns strangers into neighbors, treats them as we ourselves want to be treated.

People who say that the Christian life is easy, or boring, or just uninteresting, haven't really engaged, or are wounded with deep, deep wounds. You want a challenge: become a new sort of human being, like Jesus was a new sort of human being. You want to be ethical: take up Jesus' life as your own, and become a little Jesus, a Christian--which was originally a slur that meant "little Christ." And Jesus' life was characterized by one consistent virtue, that stained every single action he had, decision he made, notion he thought, emotion he controlled.

It was love.

Paul tries to get his arms around it, when he tells the Corinth congregation this:

Love:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13 NIV)

To become like Jesus means we become love embodied, all the time.

And for those of us who still have a "Yes, but how?" or a "Yes, but what if?" For those of us with big buts, right? Let me suggest a few things that I think can position us to be faithful, hopeful, and loving--like Jesus was--in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Tips: Using Jesus' Life As A Reference:

If we are in a situation, and we don't know what to do, we should ask ourselves, "Did Jesus ever face a situation like I'm in right now?" If the answer is yes, then we can begin to figure out how to line up our behavior with Jesus' behavior. Our problem is that even if we know the life of Jesus really well, we can still forget things. This is where our great resource of each other comes in, and we can ask, not "What should I do?" of each other, but "Can you think of a situation Jesus was in that's like the one I'm in? Can you help me think of how Jesus would respond to this?"

Of course, we could do this best, we could improvise Jesus best, if we saturate ourselves with Scripture the same way we do our favorite political commentary.

Tips: Wait For A Second:

Some situations don't give us the time to seek advice, to do research, to think through something. Some of us are so soaked with Scripture, so practiced at being like Jesus, that we have retrained our instincts. In a difficult situation, our automatic response has become to do what is most hopeful, most faithful, most loving. For the rest of us, what we can do in a situation is not react.

We simply wait to respond. We wait one moment to speak,

to defend our choices, explain ourselves, answer the charge or question or thing that's come at us. And in that second, rather than leaping to our own defense, we do two things:

We remember that God loves the person we're about to respond to, and that God wants us to show them love.

And we go from there. Usually, in the situations in which this is relevant, this means that we lovingly buy ourselves and them some time, and say, "You know what, I have to back off from this conversation, this moment, because I don't think that I'm able to interact with you lovingly. Can we talk in a few minutes." Later we can say, "I think we're operating with a different ethic when it comes to this topic."

Our goal as Christians is not to be nice--that's an unspoken rule we follow--and it's not to make another person happy--that's a consequence that we have no control over--it's to be faithful, hopeful, and loving. And that often means interrupting a situation, so that we might re-engage it with Jesus in our guts, not our anger, resentment, frustration, ill-will, or the opinions of whatever commentator we just listened to.

Tip: Confess & Repent

Sometimes we blow it. In a given situation, we act like the devil, accusing, tempting, and dehumanizing people. We act out of ignorance, resolving this or that course of action without the whole story. We act like children, selfish and immature and ruled by our appetites. What we say, and

post, and joke about as a response to what we hear has nothing to do with Jesus, and everything to do with our own sin, our retreat to self-serving rules and ends that are in line with our wants, not others' good.

In those situations, we have to confess our "bad" choices--and we define bad by the choice having nothing to do with Jesus, right? It's not faithful, hopeful, or loving--we have to articulate our wrong choices, and choose to leave them behind us, turning back to Jesus' way of life. We confess and we repent.

And I know Jesus didn't have anything to repent of; He didn't have anything to confess. But he told us who follow him to do these things; if his ethic is based on obedience, so is ours--obedience to him.

Confession and repentance are, geez, our heartbeat rhythm as people who make choices like Jesus. Their tick-tock is the sound of our old way of life winding down, and, slowly over time, we do have to do less of this, because we blow it less often. I don't think the sound goes away until Jesus returns; maybe in one or two of the holiest saints.

Confess to God. Confess to faithful friends and family. Confess away. But let's let our repentance have teeth; accountability is good, integrity is better, and we have an amazing capacity to turn away from something and turn right back to it again. Like all faithful things, figuring out how to repent well takes effort, and yet, if we commit to confession and repentance, we'll be forced to deal with the ways we default to devilish behavior instead of improvising Jesus' life in our own.

Tip: No Neutrality

I think we have to remember that there is no neutral ground in this world. There is no safe space to not decide to act on the things we hear. To pursue the good is to pursue not my good, not your good, not even our good, but God's good, which is a good for not only those we know, but those we don't know. It's to become Jesus to the world, and in every place we have influence, live up to his example. That will mean following rules, that will mean working towards goals, but those rules and those goals need tested against love, and again, all we have power over is the moment at hand. But we don't have the luxury of not having to do anything. That's a kind of rest—the resting from bearing witness to the Kingdom of God—that won't come until Christ's return.

Conclusion:

This afternoon will demand we make choices. Our choices are meant to be ones that faithfully match Jesus' character.

Every attempt at doing as Jesus did is a win, every attempt. You can't fail at trying faithfulness. It may not be a success, as far as you daydreamed success would be, but the point of a Christian life isn't success as far as we daydream it; the point is faithfulness, being like Jesus in whatever circumstance we're in. Our choices are guided by our internal drive to cultivate Jesus' character--the virtues that he lived by--inside ourselves.

When we read the news, hear the news, are forced to face how fallen and broken the world around us, we have to be able to respond to it well. There's only one standard for us,

and it's whether we line up with Christ or against him, act as Jesus or as the accuser of his people. The good we pursue is bigger than us, the expression of the love of God in every place everywhere. And yet, it's made real, actualized, in our individual acts of faithful integrity.

If we just lean into this, the littlest bit, the Spirit will grow us to be more like Christ than we are now. We'll make good, right choices--ones that line up with Jesus, and act out his life right in the middle of ours.

But it takes effort, it takes training, and I can't persuade us it's worth it. I will always pray God proves to us it is, though.