



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

June 1988

## CHRISTIAN MORALITY

We may sometimes like to think that our spiritual lives are lived only in the spirit: in prayer and worship and spiritual reading. But we know better. We live in the world, and we cannot get very far spiritually unless we live out our spiritual exercises materially. Though we are spiritual beings, we are also material ones, and the two sides of our nature must live out their lives together. As Christians we seek not to deny the material side of our being, but to integrate it with the spiritual. We want the whole of our being dedicated to the one great enterprise of being a Christian.

We know all this, of course. And we practice it in various ways in our spiritual lives. Fasting is all too material for us. We kneel to pray. We give alms of our material wealth -- and recognize that all these material things are part of our spiritual discipline.

As important as these ascetic works are to Christian growth, moral acts are even more central: doing what is right and not doing what is sinful. No doubt this is obvious enough when it comes to murder and lying and adultery. But there are also temptations which put particular obstacles in our way because of our culture -- especially with regard to money.

The worst area of all is taxes, especially income taxes. We are all (I suspect) tempted if not to cheat, at least to fudge a little when we fill out those terrible forms. It is easy to exaggerate our expenses a little in the deductions, or to "forget" a little income which was not otherwise reported to the IRS. I suspect we are not seriously inclined to do worse than this for fear of getting caught. In any case, we are tempted to save a little money by being less than completely honest.

We may justify this by saying that everyone surely does it, or by thinking that we would use the money much more wisely than the government (hard to dispute!), or just by assuming that it is so small an amount that it doesn't really matter. We do as much as anyone else does, and could probably get away with it. But that is not really the point: have we done all that we can? Do we measure up to the standard of Christ and not just of man?

There are other tax temptations as well. A homeowner may be tempted to conceal home improvements for fear that the house be reassessed. He may even think this justified since the assessments in his town are so inequitable. (Assessments are always inequitable to everyone except the assessor!) Or one may be tempted to maintain the "legal fiction" of a residence other than the real one, so as to be taxed at a lower rate. On one level this seems only prudent for those who have the means to do so, and the financial incentive is often considerable. There may even be a legal loophole which allows it to be at least technically legal even if it is outside the intention of the law.

Or take sales taxes. Helpful clerks may suggest ways of avoiding the tax by having the purchase delivered out of state or some other ploy. It may even be legal. And when it is legal, it gets even harder to tell if it is moral for us as Christians. How do we tell? How can we judge such matters?

Similar temptations exist apart from matters of money. Gossip is an obvious one. Our nonchristian neighbors see nothing wrong with a little good gossip so long as it is not too malicious or destructive. But for us, even a little is bad: it is at best unnecessary. Jesus has warned us that nothing will be hidden from the judgment at the Last Day, and for that we must prepare ourselves.

There is an added pressure to these temptations. For these are areas where nonchristians in the world around us see nothing wrong. They do not regard the deeds as sin, but as reasonable things for people to do. So if we do not go along, they will think us stupid or else judgmental. We will be accused of a "holier than thou" attitude, whether justly or not. These are hard areas, but we must look at them with the eyes of faith: what does our Christian devotion to God require of us? Then we will be willing to do it (by His grace), even if it turns out to be costly.

Christian morality is not based on a system of law. There is no complete, authoritative set of rules to which we can refer. Our righteousness is not to be the legal one -- such that we can attain for ourselves. Christians sometimes think that this is the case. They treat others according to their rules of propriety: some will measure up (and be pronounced "good Christians"), others will not. But this is a very worldly notion of the faith, and one which leaves

no room for sinners in the Church. And Jesus certainly had room for sinners -- "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Mark 2:17) Purely legal righteousness -- obeying the letter of the commandment -- is a mechanical thing; it is not the righteousness of children who receive the love of the Father. As such, it would reduce us to the position of slaves -- not understanding the will of the Master but just obeying mindlessly.

Our righteousness is to be the righteousness of loving children of God. Children are taught what their father wants of them. He shares with them a vision of virtuous life and its joys, as well as telling them specific things that are wrong. Children must sometimes obey on faith -- just because their father has said that they must do it. But as they grow up, they understand more and more of what he is about, and so can judge for themselves what is consistent and what is incompatible with his wishes. It is their love for their father that brings them to obey. They know his love for them, and they love him back.

We are the adopted children of the Father. We aspire to return the love we have received from Him. We see that love manifested to us on the Cross. We must never doubt God's love for us. If we are willing to place ourselves frequently at the foot of the Cross we will never doubt His love, and will learn how we are to love Him back.

And if we love Him we will obey His commandments (John 14:15). Our love is not just a matter of warm, gushy feelings, but of deeds as well. In particular, we show our love for our Father by doing what He has told us, even when there are no warm feelings. This loving obedience is part of our relationship with Him. It regulates how we act toward other people as well. Thus it includes all that we do in the world.

We aspire to love God wholly. We want all that we do to be brought under the illumination of grace, and thus within His love. Then it can all be part of the love we have for Him. Practically this means that we will study the Scriptures: first that we may know God better and thus love Him better. Second, we will search the Scriptures for concrete guidance in what is right and what is wrong. Though it does not prescribe for every situation (for then it would teach law and not grace), it still gives us much guidance, and trains us in the principles that must form our decisions. Scripture is the key to Christian moral life, because Christian moral life is based on what God has told us -- of Himself, and of our nature.

So our moral life is a matter of learning to love God: to love Him more than anything else in the world. It is practice here and now of our true citizenship, that of heaven. We must live as citizens of heaven even while we are still on earth. So will we be

ready to take our place there which God has prepared for us. We pray as citizens of heaven, as sons of God, and if our conduct apart from prayer is incompatible with that citizenship, then we will be placing obstacles in the way of our prayer, as well in the way of heaven itself.

It comes down to this: we cannot have it both ways. We cannot serve self and God. No man can serve two masters, Jesus has told us. Therefore, He must be Lord of all of our life, even of tax forms. We must fill out that form not in the fear of the IRS, but in the fear of God. We must be as honest then as we are in our prayers. Rendering unto Ceasar that which is Ceasar's is in a sense as important as rendering unto God that which is His. For if we are dishonest in material things, we are unlikely to be able to be honest in spiritual things. We will not know how to be honest at all.

Clearly the Christian is bound by a much higher moral code than the nonchristian. For us, it is the responsibility of returning the redeeming love of God. Not just keeping the rules; not just not getting caught when we do break them. For us it is irrelevant if we get caught cheating on our taxes: God already knows. And what we do materially comes from the heart (whether we care to admit it or not). We betray the dishonesty or greed that is in the heart when we play fast and loose with our honesty on tax forms, or if we think the money is more important than the principle. This is an unpleasant fact and we may not want to admit it. But only by admitting it, and confessing it, can we allow God to heal it.

This is why we should watch ourselves so closely in these areas of temptation. What we do will tell us something of what is in the heart. We will see if we are really behaving as children of God, loving Him so much that we will do as we know He wishes, simply for fear of offending the One we love so much.

There is another reason for us to be rigorous with ourselves in Christian morals. We are Christ's body in the world. Nonchristians look at us to see what Christianity is about. They should be able to see something of Christ in us. A good, if sobering, exercise in self-examination is to ask what others see in us. If we looked at ourselves as others see us, what would we conclude that Christ is like?

Every time we give in to the world's standards at the expense of Christian morals we hide the light of the Redeemer from the world. Every bit of gossip, every time we fudge on our taxes, we proclaim that Christians know no more about the love of God than anyone else. We should fear to offend the love of God in this way. We should instead judge ourselves, and seek God's grace to so live in this world, that we may live with Him in the next.