

an essay:

THE ETHICS OF GOD OVER THAT OF MAN

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I. A PROPOSITION

Any true ethical system must be rooted in The GOD of The Holy Bible.

II. THE TEXT – PSALM 100:5 – THE LORD IS ALL GOOD, MERCY AND TRUTH!

“For The LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations.”¹ From The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia:

כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ וְעֶדְדוֹ וְדָר אֱמוּנָתוֹ:²

KIY-TOV YEHVAH, LE”OLAM CHASEDO, VE”AD-DOR VADOR ‘EMUNATO.

III. INTRODUCTION

We ask here, “Why must all true ethical systems be rooted in The GOD of The Holy Bible?” The question may be rephrased in this way, "Upon whose justice should ethical systems be based - man's or GOD's?" If man is the arbiter of truth, goodness and mercy, the ethical system brought forth can only be unstable, ever changing and unjust. The fruits of such flawed ethical systems are found in the debauched “works of the flesh.” But GOD is The Arbiter of Absolute Truth, Goodness and Mercy. The ethical system based upon The Almighty’s justice brings forth what is stable, never changing and just. Its happy harvest is to be found in “the fruits of The Spirit!”

IV. THE NATURE OF ETHICS BASED ON THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

Ethics based upon The GOD of The Holy Bible are good, merciful and true because The Almighty Himself is good, merciful and true! Those based upon man are not because man himself apart from GOD is none of these things. We find this laid out for us by the psalmist in PSALM 100:5. The 3 keywords describing Who GOD is in This Text are “good, mercy and truth.” The King James Version of PSALM 100:5 gives us, “For The LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations.”³ And from The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia:⁴

כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ וְעֶדְדוֹ וְדָר אֱמוּנָתוֹ:⁵

¹ 1, KJV, PSALM 100:5.

² 2, BHS, PSALM 100:5.

³ 1, KJV, PSALM 100:5.

⁴ 2, BHS, PSALM 100:5.

⁵ 3, Whittaker’s Revised BDB Hebrew Lexicon, page 53, B597 ‘EMUNAH אֱמוּנָה - n.f. firmness, steadfastness, fidelity.

⁶ 3, Whittaker’s Revised BDB Hebrew Lexicon, page 338, B3297 CHESED חֶסֶד n.m. goodness, kindness of GOD.

⁷ 3, Whittaker’s Revised BDB Hebrew Lexicon, page 373, B3664 TOV טוֹב adj. - pleasant, agreeable, good, kind, ethical, right [as characteristics of GOD].

I offer this transliteration: KIY-TOV YEHVAH, LE”OLAM CHASEDO, VE”AD-DOR VADOR ‘EMUNATO. Or more literally, “Because good [is] The LORD! Belonging to antiquity [is] the mercy of Him! And as far as the period and the generation[s] [is] the steadfastness of Him!” Or as The Young’s Literal Translation gives it, “For good is JEHOVAH, to the age His kindness, And to generation and generation His faithfulness!”⁸ Let us take a closer look at these characteristics of The LORD, that we might be better able to choose what foundation ethics should be built upon.

V. GOD IS ALL GOOD AND PERFECT GOODNESS; MAN IS NOT

Man is to worship, praise and follow The LORD because KIY-TOV YEHVAH - יהוה טוב - “Because The LORD is good!” When we speak of GOD as TOV - טוב - good, we refer to that innate quality of The Almighty, in that He is all and perfectly “...good, kind, ethical [and] right.”⁹

The Reverend Charles Spurgeon observes here that “...He is good, gracious, kind, bountiful, loving; yea, GOD is love. He who does not praise the good is not good himself. The kind of praise inculcated in The PSALM, viz., that of joy and gladness, is most fitly urged upon us by an argument from the goodness of GOD!”¹⁰ Therefore, GOD is all good and full of perfect goodness. Man in contrast is not. Apart from GOD, we can not know what the measure of goodness is. Any ethical system not founded upon GOD’s goodness is thus inherently flawed and not “good.”

VI. GOD IS ALL MERCIFUL AND PERFECT MERCY; MAN IS NOT

Man is to worship, praise and follow The LORD because LE”OLAM CHASEDO - לעולם חסדו - Because “His mercy is everlasting!” GOD’s everlasting CHESED - חסד - is His “...lovingkindness in condescending to the needs of [we] His creatures... [especially] in [the] redemption [of we His saints] from enemies and troubles; ...[We find His mercy] in preservation of life from death; in quickening of spiritual life; in redemption from sin; in keeping The Covenants...” with His people both Old and New!¹¹

Saint Augustine says here, “For He will not cease to be merciful, after He hath freed thee: it belongeth to His mercy to protect thee even unto eternal life!”¹² Therefore, GOD is all merciful and full of perfect mercy. Man in contrast is not. Apart from GOD, we can not know what the measure of mercy is. Any ethical system not founded upon GOD’s mercy is thus inherently flawed and not “merciful.”

⁸ 4, YLT, PSALM 100:5.

⁹ 3, Whittaker’s Revised BDB Hebrew Lexicon, page 373, B3664 TOV טוב adj. - pleasant, agreeable, good, kind, ethical, right [as characteristics of GOD].

¹⁰ 5, The Treasury of David, PSALM 100, Verse 5, on GOD’s goodness.

¹¹ 3, Whittaker’s Revised BDB Hebrew Lexicon, page 338, B3297 CHESED חסד n.m. goodness, kindness of GOD.

¹² 6, St. Augustine’s Exposition on The PSALMS, PSALM C, 13, on GOD’s mercy..

VII. GOD IS ALL TRUTH AND PERFECT TRUTHFULNESS; MAN IS NOT

Man is to worship, praise and follow The LORD because VE”AD-DOR VADOR ‘EMONATO - וְעַד-דֹּר וְדֹר אֱמוּנָתוֹ - Because “His truth endures to all generations!” GOD’s truth – from אֱמוּנָה ‘EMUNAH - is His “firmness, steadfastness, faithfulness [and] trust[worthiness]...”¹³

The Reverend Charles Spurgeon observes here, “No fickle being is He, promising and forgetting. He has entered into Covenant with His people, and He will never revoke it, nor alter the thing that has gone out of His lips. As our fathers found Him faithful, so will our sons, and their seed for ever!”¹⁴ Therefore, GOD is all truthful and full of perfect truth. Man in contrast is not. Apart from GOD, we can not know what the measure of truth is. Any ethical system not founded upon GOD’s truth is thus inherently flawed and not “truthful.”

VIII. THE PURPOSE OF MAN IS FOUND ONLY IN THE GOD OF SCRIPTURES

Saint Augustine saw that the purpose of man is to be in communion both now and forever with The Almighty, Who stands at the apex of perfect goodness and beckons us to Himself at The Cross of The Saviour. Our telos or end is the enjoyment of GOD, Who alone is “The Supreme Good, by reference to which all our actions are directed. It is The Good we seek for itself and not because of something else, and once attained, we seek nothing further to make us happy!”¹⁵ He Who the Greek philosophers could discern only dimly, and Who The Israelites knew of only from a distance, we as Christians may know as it were face to face - our Lord JESUS CHIST, Who is “The Love of GOD” Incarnate!¹⁶

Saint Aquinas echoes this theme, stating that “...the end of the intellectual creature [is] to understand GOD.”¹⁷ Human reason and will he held are still in part capable of seeking The Creator in spite of Original Sin because The Image of GOD is still to be found in men. But not so with The Likeness of GOD in us, which is lost to fallen man. Therefore, “We no longer enjoy the supernatural gift of righteousness.”¹⁸

“Nor can we now love GOD as we should.”¹⁹ The restoration of righteousness in man, and the ability to truly love GOD, is only by The Body and Blood of The Son of GOD given to wash away our sins. Or as Saint Paul says in I CORINTHIANS 6:11, “...but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in The Name of The Lord JESUS, and by The Spirit of our GOD!”²⁰

¹³ 3, Whittaker’s Revised BDB Hebrew Lexicon, page 53, B597 ‘EMUNAH אֱמוּנָה - n.f. firmness, steadfastness, fidelity.

¹⁴ 5, The Treasury of David, PSALM 100, Verse 5, on GOD’s truthfulness.

¹⁵ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, quote of St. Augustine, paragraph 5, page 135.

¹⁶ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, quote of St. Augustine, paragraph 1, page 137.

¹⁷ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, quote of St. Aquinas, paragraph 1, page 146.

¹⁸ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, observation on St. Aquinas, paragraph 1, page 147.

¹⁹ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, observation on St. Aquinas, paragraph 1, page 147.

²⁰ 1, KJV, I CORINTHIANS 6:11.

Aquinas saw that, because GOD's Image is still in fallen man – though tarnished by iniquity and separation from GOD - we may still in part apprehend He Who is our telos from a distance by proper use of our reason. It is The LORD Who implants in us “prudence (reason controlling itself so as to reason well about and command good moral actions), justice (reason controlling the will so that it habitually wills what is good for others), and temperance and fortitude (reason controlling the passions).”²¹

Aquinas saw however, that to not merely know of GOD, but to know Him personally, men require His amazing Grace found at The Cross. For it is only by the restoring of The Likeness of GOD in us by The HOLY SPIRIT – bought back for us only by the merits of our Saviour JESUS CHRIST - that we may live the Christian virtues which Saint Paul speaks of in I CORINTHIANS 13:13: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”²²

To live the ethical Christian life in all its fullness, Martin Luther emphasized that we need to daily live these things: obedience and submission to GOD's Law, and faith and trust in GOD's saving Grace. GOD's Law is “...the prelude to The Gospel; it acts as a schoolmaster bringing us to CHRIST.” The Law restrains sin, protects the innocent, encourages the just and shows us “...how woefully short of GOD's glory we fall!”²³ GOD's Law teaches us that we are all sinners before His Throne, and that we are justified before Him only by His Grace, which we may find only in our Redeemer CHRIST.

So Saint Paul in ROMANS 3:11-12 echoes the words of David in PSALM 14: “There is none that understandeth, ...that seeketh after GOD. ...that doeth good, no, not one!”²⁴ Therefore Luther concludes that the Christian man, “always [still a] sinner,” yet “always justified” by The Grace of GOD, must rest in faith and trust always upon GOD's free and full Gift of forgiveness at The Cross of CHRIST!²⁵ So Saint Paul declares in ROMANS 3:23-24, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of GOD; Being justified freely by His Grace through the redemption that is in CHRIST JESUS!”²⁶

IX. LIVING IN THE LUSTS OF THE FLESH OR THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

So we have before us two roads which lead to two very different ethical systems. One road - based on man's flawed goodness, mercy and truth - leads men to sin, suffering and death both earthly and eternal. Its ethics embrace the ever shifting and inherently depraved injustice of men, the fruits of which are scattered through the many wars, concentration camps and oppression of man by his fellow man! As CHRIST says in MATTHEW 12:35, “...an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things!”²⁷

²¹ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, observation on St. Aquinas, paragraph 3, page 148-149.

²² 8, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:13.

²³ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, observation on Martin Luther, paragraph 4, page 156-157.

²⁴ 1, KJV, ROMANS 3:11-12.

²⁵ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, quotes Martin Luther, paragraph 1, page 157.

²⁶ 1, KJV, ROMANS 3:23-24.

²⁷ 1, KJV, MATTHEW 12:35b.

The heart not renewed and washed clean in righteousness by the hand of GOD can be nothing but evil.

The other road – based on GOD’s perfect goodness, mercy and truth – leads men to righteousness, peace and life both earthly and eternal. It’s ethics embrace the never changing and absolute justice of GOD, the fruits of which we see in human history as the good works of the upright for which GOD called out first ancient Israel and now His Church! As CHRIST teaches us in MATTHEW 12:35, “A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things!”²⁸ Only the heart renewed and washed clean by the hand of GOD in The HOLY SPIRIT is capable of good.

So Saint Paul calls the Christian man in ROMANS 13:13-14: “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on The Lord JESUS CHRIST, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof!”²⁹ The ethics of man bring only suffering, sin, pain and death to the body and the soul. But The Ethics of The GOD of The Bible bring peace, righteousness, blessing and life to the body and the soul!

X. THE ETHICS OF MAN YIELD THE WORKS OF THE FLESH

Saint Augustine declares that being in communion with GOD is man’s “highest good.” Still, the hard truth is “...that our human will is [often] directed toward[s] lesser objects. Whether these be the lusts of the flesh or the lusts of the mind, the result is same. Instead of desiring GOD with our whole heart, our will is directed” elsewhere in the setting up of idols in our hearts and over our lives.³⁰ As Augustine observed, this is the very nature of sin itself.

The end of man’s will being diverted to things other than GOD as his central purpose in life gives rise to what Saint Paul calls “the works of the flesh.” The Apostle identifies for us what the life of a man looks like that - divorced from The Divine Grace at The Cross of CHRIST - remains in its fallen, unregenerate and sinful state. So we read of the works of the flesh in GALATIANS 5:19-21,26: “...adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like... [becoming] conceited, provoking one another, envying one another!”³¹

XI. THE ETHICS OF GOD YIELD THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

Saint John declares in I JOHN 4:7-8, “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of GOD; and every one that loveth is born of GOD, and knoweth GOD. He that loveth not knoweth not GOD; for GOD is love.”³² For Augustine, “Love is both the chief virtue and the fountain of all other virtues, for virtue is [as Augustine says,] ‘nothing else

²⁸ 1, KJV, MATTHEW 12:35a.

²⁹ 1, KJV, ROMANS 13:13-14.

³⁰ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, observation on St. Augustine, paragraph 1, page 138.

³¹ 8, NKJV, GALATIANS 5:19-21,26.

³² 1, KJV, I JOHN 4:7-8.

than perfect love of GOD!”³³ The love of which he speaks rests firmly in The Gospel of our Lord JESUS CHRIST.

Taking that Divine love of The Gospel, Augustine reinterprets the four core virtues of Plato – temperance, fortitude, justice and prudence - and expands them: “Temperance is love giving itself entirely to GOD; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of GOD; justice is love serving GOD only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a distinction between what helps it towards GOD and what might hinder it.”³⁴ By the power of The HOLY SPIRIT working in the hearts, souls and minds of The Redeemed, virtues are moved from the shaky subjectivity of man’s mere philosophical ramblings to the steadfast objectivity of GOD’s Absolute decrees.

Life in The Spirit of GOD – in both this world and the next – are wonderful to both behold and live because they rest upon the perfect and holy Nature of The LORD Almighty Himself! The joyous fruits of the redeemed and regenerated saints of GOD are good, merciful and truthful because GOD is All Goodness, Mercy and Truth! “The fruits of The Spirit,” which Saint Paul lists for us in GALATIANS 5:22-23, are these: “...love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...”³⁵ How does one live the “fruits of The Spirit?” Only by GOD’s Grace, made open to us by the loving sacrifice of The Son of GOD on The Cross! The truly ethical life is to be found only “...in GOD’s love for us; [For] the ethical life comes [only] as the gift of Divine Grace!”³⁶

XII. IN CONCLUSION

Upon what foundation should our ethics be based? There are two alternatives: the ever changing and flawed justice of men, or the never changing and perfect Justice of GOD. We may discern that GOD exists from a study of the order of creation. But only in The Holy Scriptures do we find Who The LORD is in His character. So for example PSALM 100:5 declares, “For The LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations.”³⁷ If we seek to build a truly just ethical system, it must be based upon His absolute and flawless goodness, mercy and truth.

Saint Augustine saw that the true purpose and telos of man is to be in communion with The Perfect One in both this world and the next, Who is JESUS CHRIST, Divine Love Incarnate. To Augustine’s Christian understanding of the natural virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, Saint Aquinas adds the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Martin Luther focuses on the necessity of obedience and submission to GOD’s Law and faith and trust in GOD’s saving Grace. Men may find the true living out of these virtues only in knowing and serving The LORD, by salvation in The Saviour JESUS CHRIST and new birth in The HOLY SPIRIT.

³³ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, quotes St. Augustine, paragraph 1, page 139.

³⁴ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, quotes St. Augustine, paragraph 2, page 139.

³⁵ 8, NKJV, GALATIANS 5:22-23.

³⁶ 7, Grenz, Chapter 4, observations on St. Augustine, paragraph 4, page 139.

³⁷ 1, KJV, PSALM 100:5.

The ethical system based upon man's flawed and ever changing justice can lead only to sin, suffering and death both physical and eternal. But the ethical system based upon GOD's perfect and never changing justice may lead us to righteousness, peace and life both physical and eternal. If we mean to base our lives and our society on GOD's perfect goodness, mercy and truth, we must seek to both know of Him and to know Him as it were face to face. His existence is undeniably testified by all of creation. His Decrees are found only in The Holy Scriptures. And we may become His people only at The Cross of our Lord JESUS CHRIST. Therefore, any true ethical system must be rooted in The GOD of The Holy Bible! In The Name of GOD The Father, and The Son, and The Holy Ghost. AMEN.

XIII. REFERENCES

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