

THE WESLEYAN THEOLOGY SERIES

# Christian Ethics

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Gaines



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# Beginning the Work of Christian Ethics

Part I



## The Work of Christian Ethics

The morning was still new when a young man approached the shore of the lake and found there a group of workers concluding their day's labors. Their bearded faces were sunbaked and deeply lined. Their arms, backs, and legs carried the evidence of the hardscrabble work that had shaped their bodies since they were young. Rough, calloused hands skillfully manipulated their equipment while the men joked with one another in the unrefined dialect of those whose circumstances had pressed them into a trade, rather than the opportunities a formal education could have afforded them. Maybe it wouldn't matter anyway, since they lived so far from the center of political power and philosophical discovery. These were men of lake and land who strained every day to extract a living from the unforgiving earth. There, on the shoreline of a lake in northern Israel, where the water-work of fishermen met the soil-work of farmers, Jesus struck up a conversation.

He talked to them about fishing and even gave them some advice on their lifelong craft. When his suggestion resulted in a boat full of fish, they were ready to listen to what else he had to say. But Jesus didn't say much. He didn't use the opportunity to astound them with the depth of his insight or dazzle them with his intellect. Rather, he called them to follow him—to walk away from the family busi-

ness, to step away from the only lives they had ever known, and to take the journey of a lifetime (Luke 5:1–11).

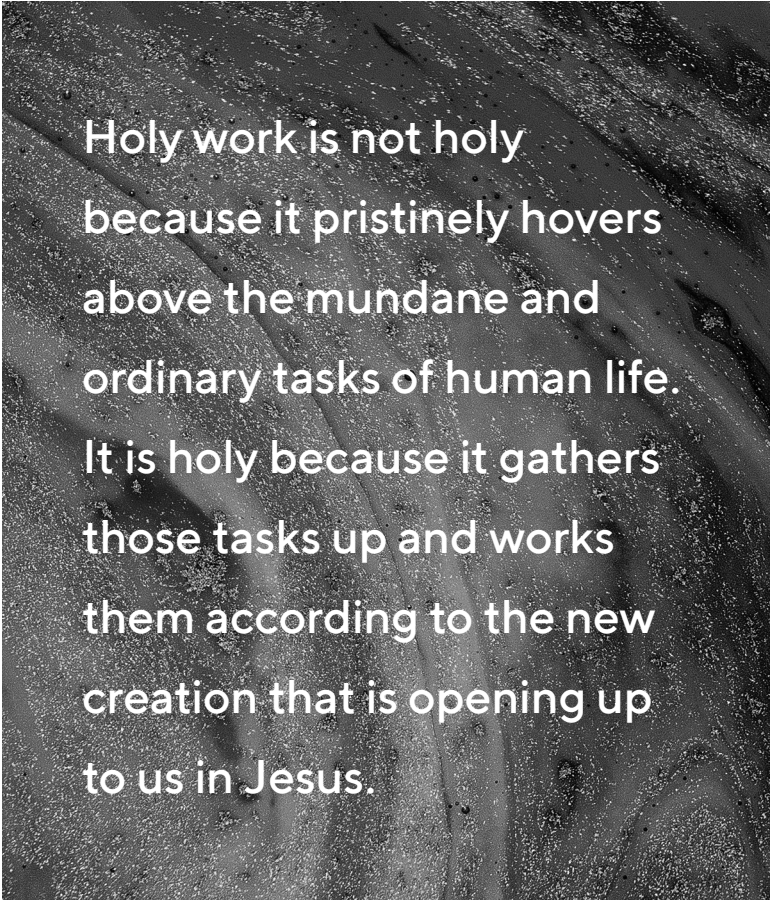
If we are looking for somewhere to start exploring Christian ethics, the shore of that lake would be a good choice. What happened there was a call to some everyday people to catch a glimpse of God’s work in the midst of a fallen world and to tune their lives to that work. There, God became bound up with the work of a groaning creation, an intermingling that altogether affirmed the Creator’s commitment to everyday people—and in particular with those whose everyday lives are hard.

Whatever we might eventually say about Christian ethics, we must remember the people on the shore of the Galilean sea, working to scratch out a simple life for themselves. Among those people Jesus issued his first call to follow him and his ways. Jesus’s call was not a clever doctrinal theory or thought experiment. It came to real people in the midst of their real lives, and called them to real action in the midst of real situations: “Follow me.”

In this sense, Jesus did not offer them “ethics,” if by that word we mean a set of organized principles by which lives are ordered. Jesus’s teachings were not moralistic life lessons that one could easily consume and go on their way. No, his teachings made claims upon their lives and called on them to follow his way. His teachings do not float above the lives of his followers but are deeply connected to the realities of their everyday lives, what they do, how they arrange their lives, and whom they follow.

The realities of everyday life are what I’ll call “work.” Not to be confused with our jobs, work in this context is the way our flesh interacts with the world around us. It is what we do with our bodies—the actions we give to this embodied life. Each and every day, we align our work toward particular ends or goals. We reach for an apple with the aim of gaining nutrition, for example. We press the flesh of our





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fingertips onto computer keyboards, we plop our tired bones down in the front seat of a car and drive home after a long shift, we open our arms and embrace a loved one, holding their flesh close to ours. This is our work.

Our work is something we may be paid to do, though that is not always the case. For about eight hours of most days, full-time employees give their bodies to the work of their jobs. The movements they make and the ways they use their bodies are aimed at repairing appliances, teaching children, harvesting fruit, designing graphics, or painting houses. When the shift is over, though, work does not stop. There is the work of making dinner, tending to finances, playing with children, and the work of resting. Work is what we *do*.

Christian ethics, then, are *worked* ethics. This is not to say that they are not also thoughtful but that they are not exclusively intellectual—because such a thing would be too far separated from the work of our flesh. In the same way that Israelite fishermen did not have the luxury of catching theoretical fish, Christian ethics does not have the luxury of being reduced to theoretical enterprise. Instead, Jesus calls those who are in the middle of their work.

## The Sanctification of Our Work

His call is not to stop work, though. Rather, he calls us to redirect our work toward his purposes. “I see that you are doing some work,” Jesus might have said to the sons of Zebedee. “Now, what if I taught you to direct that work toward the new creation I am bringing? Let’s talk about how one fishes according to my purposes.” The journey that began on that lakeshore was a master class in learning to reflect on one’s work and to aim that work toward holiness. Holy work is not holy because it pristinely hovers above the mundane and ordinary tasks of human life. It is holy



because it gathers those tasks up and works them according to the new creation that is opening up to us in Jesus.

We could say that the work of those Galilean fishermen underwent a *conversion*. It was turned toward God's purposes. It was made holy. Fishing for food became fishing for people. The direction of their work took a distinctly different turn, but their calluses did not disappear. They were still fishermen, even as their nets became a distant memory.

One of the primary questions of Christian ethics is how our work can be converted to God's purposes—or made holy. Our work is converted—*sanctified*—rather than abandoned or erased. In directing it toward God's purposes, our work is not obliterated, but it is given up as an act of praise to the one who has lovingly spoken creation into good order. The work of our lives, sanctified toward holy aims, is nothing more than the faithful response we give to the Word that has been spoken to us. Sanctified work is our “amen” offered in response to what God has spoken first.

A Christian ethics in the Wesleyan tradition opens the possibility that we don't need to leave our work, our training, or even ourselves. It does inquire as to whether those things are aligned toward the new creation God is bringing. It helps us find where our work may not be entirely attuned to new creation and calls upon us to make adjustments. In calling those fishermen to follow, Jesus didn't tell them to stop being Galilean fishermen. He didn't tell them their lack of formal education had to be remedied or that they were going to need to start acting a bit more like Jerusalem sophisticates rather than the backwater fishermen they were. The call to discipleship as it came to the sons of Zebedee did not ignore the real situations of their lives. They were still fishermen. They continued to speak with Galilean accents (Matt. 26:73). They were still workers.

Our own work may be the work of healing, parenting, teaching, caring for children or the elderly, communicating,

delivering, reading, repairing, growing, or selling—and all of these are capable of undergoing a conversion to be performed as acts of discipleship. The question Christian ethics asks is about where that work is going. It is the option Jesus placed in front of a group of water workers. They had once pressed their flesh into the work of catching fish, but from this point on, their work would be fishing for people. These were men who were not converted from workers to non-workers. (How could this be possible? Our work persists as long as we are flesh.) Rather, their work was *converted* toward a different aim—it was sanctified. Christian ethics cannot only be a set of moral ideals or ethical principles. It must ask about real-life realities and reflect vigorously on how our work in those realities can be converted to the way of Jesus. It asks how our work aims toward new creation in the midst of an old, fallen, and groaning creation. It is the ongoing task of working, reflecting, adjusting, and working again—all while the call of Jesus rings in our ears: *Follow me, and I will teach you a new way to work.*

## The Renewed Heart in the Work of Christian Ethics

So long as we are learning how to align our work with the new-life reality Jesus opens to us, we need to reflect on that work and ask whether it happened according to the prayer Jesus taught us: “on earth as it is in heaven.” Christian ethics cannot consist of working without reflecting on whether what we’ve done has been fully committed to the kingdom that Jesus initiated. Yet neither can it consist of reflecting without working. Reason alone will not convert our work to the way of Jesus. Even if we perfectly conceived of such work, there’s no guarantee we would actually do it. This is why the work of Christian ethics will also need

to involve the seat of our motivation—or what the biblical writers refer to as the heart.<sup>1</sup>

One of the distinctive affirmations of the Wesleyan tradition is the belief in *orthokardia*—the idea that we must be people of right *hearts* alongside our right practices and right beliefs.<sup>2</sup> In the shadow of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, some approaches to ethics highlight how one comes to have the right ideas that are convincing enough to shape someone's actions. The Wesleyan tradition does not dismiss rigorous intellectual reflection but recognizes its limits. It asks serious questions about whether the Christian moral life is about finding the right *ideas* about God and then structuring a set of ethics to fit that information.

Even if we were able to get all of our ideas in order and somehow gain an utterly complete idea of God, there is nothing to say that those ideas alone would move us to action. We could tick every ethical box with a sense of drudgery, anger, or fear. Even those who are convinced of the perfection of their ideas can be miserable people whose ethical motivation revolves around willing themselves through the moral hoops of life. That isn't the vision of the moral life in the Wesleyan tradition, though. For Wesley, holiness is happiness, and the moral life is the gift of delight.

Humans are creatures whose hearts link the intellect to our motivations; thought and action are united in and directed by the heart. The heart uniting the intellect with action is what John Wesley understood to be a heart that was rightly related to God. In that relationship, the human

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1. Drawing from the biblical writers, the Wesleyan tradition imagines the human being as one whose life is unified at the heart. The heart is the center of our *motivation*.

2. The Greek word *kardia* translates into English most often as “heart,” and it is where we derive terms like “cardiology,” the medical study of the heart. See Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989).

becomes an *orthokardia* being, with a heart aligned toward new creation. Envisioning ethics this way is as much a matter of the heart as it is the brain. While ethics is about the decisions we make, it's also about the *way* those decisions are made at a precognitive level—the way our heart motivates us.

At this point the Wesleyan tradition's grand promise speaks: our hearts can be transformed by God's love! An enduring Wesleyan proclamation, says Theodore Runyon, "is Wesley's insistence that the renewal of the image of God involves the creature in actual transformation—no less than re-creation."<sup>3</sup> Although reason is involved, this approach isn't about merely *thinking* our way into new creation action but about allowing the love of God to so fill our hearts that all of our work becomes converted to the way of Jesus.

## Why Christian Ethics Doesn't Apply to Your Life

This is why Christian ethics does not *apply* to our lives. My work includes teaching ethics to college students at a Christian university. The young and energetic people who fill the classroom semester after semester are usually compelled to be there because of a course requirement. The problem some of them express at the beginning of the course is, "I'm not sure how this class is going to apply to my major." They are aspiring musicians, teachers, business professionals, and engineers, so why should they have to take a course that isn't going to provide them some kind of skill that can directly benefit their chosen profession?

Many are surprised when I agree with them. "You're right," I tell them. "This class does not *apply* to your major.

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3. Theodore Runyon, *Exploring the Range of Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 175.

This class is meant to make sense of your major.” What I don’t make explicit in those first days of class is that I hope their imagination for ethics will be far more than simply layering ethical principles on top of whatever it is they are already doing. I want their work to be turned to God’s purposes—sanctified. More than wanting them to be nicer, kinder, more ethical, or well-adjusted students of their vocations, I want—in the same way Jesus wanted for the sons of Zebedee—them to give their work to a way that produces something more than fish. I want them to come to an understanding of ethics in a distinctively Christian sense that converts their work to the new creation God is bringing in Jesus Christ.

A similar dynamic emerges in my work as a preacher. The pressure to make sure the sermons “apply” to the lives of the people is hard to ignore. Often, that can take the form of a preacher offering tips and tricks for those under their pastoral care to become a bit more emotionally well adjusted to do their work for the week. The word-working that a Christian preacher does, however, is to open a story in which worshipers can find themselves and, in so doing, have their own work converted to the rhythms of that story.

The steelworker who gathers in worship can find that his work’s meaning is not measured by his employer’s stock price but by the way his work can be made holy as it is converted to the work God is doing to redeem this world. If the high school student in the congregation comes to a sermon from Luke’s Gospel expecting it to help her find answers to her physics homework, she will almost certainly be disappointed that the sermon did not “apply to her life.” If the preacher has done their word work well, though, the physics student can discover that her own work of study can be converted toward Christ’s purposes. She now learns physics for the sake of the new creation, and the gospel is what makes sense of her physics homework.



The idea that Christian ethics should be applied to our lives assumes that ethics can somehow be layered on top of a life without radically reorienting that same life. Christian ethics, though, will only make sense in light of conversion. This is why I don't think Peter or James and John would have cared for a discussion about ethics. Whatever ethics were for these fishers-turned-disciples, they were wrapped up in Jesus's call to give themselves to the way of discipleship and orient their work toward Christ's new creation purposes.

Jesus was not providing tips and tricks on how to be a more ethical version of a fisherman through the application of a few moral principles. Jesus issued a call to discipleship, and the pattern of life that emerged as Peter, James, and John turned and walked away from the boats is what Christian ethics is after. Christian ethics wants to know how a fisherman's work can be converted to fish for people, how a nurse's work can be sanctified toward the kind of healing Jesus demonstrated, or how a salesperson's work can be turned toward the kind of thing Jesus was doing in feeding the multitudes. Sometimes it calls us to leave the boats when our work is simply incompatible with the way of life Jesus offers. Christian ethics wants to know how the work of churches can be made holy as a foretaste of creation being made new. All of this assumes that Christian ethics cannot be a set of principles that are simply *applied* to the way we are already working.

If any set of ethics makes a claim to be Christian, they must be lived, walked, and embodied. They are the kind forged in the space between the soil turned by struggling farmers and the water worked by fishermen whose livelihood depended on that day's catch, and then turned toward new creation. They are the kind that isn't satisfied with making a nicer version of a worker but is interested in the more excellent way of all of that person's work being converted by love toward God's new creation project. They

will live in the down-to-earth lives of those who work and toil and who encounter Jesus in the midst of their efforts. Christian ethics does its work with calluses on its hands—not only because it came first as a calling to workers but also because it is the work that those who follow Jesus are called to do.