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## 3 NORMS

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Where does a Christian get direction, instruction, guidance for determining what is right and wrong? In chapter 2 we considered motivation—the compelling, moving reasons for doing God's will. But, no matter how powerfully motivated we are, we will not get very far in the right direction unless we know which direction that is. We need norms that reveal the specific content of the Christian life.

The term *norm* comes from the Latin *norma*, which means a carpenter's square or rule. This instrument is a perfectly square corner, and it enables the carpenter or builder to duplicate such a corner. It both exhibits and guides "squareness." Furthermore, it also reveals deviation from squareness. If you place the instrument on a piece of wood which has been sawed, you can tell whether or not the cut is square.

In an ethical discussion norms are those instruments which indicate and measure *moral* correctness. Frequently ethicists classify norms into several types. The most specific are *rules*, which are very practical and concrete. "Do not get drunk" is an example of a moral rule. Behind moral rules are *principles*, the more general and comprehensive directives or values of which

rules are specific applications. "Eat and drink to the glory of God" is one way to express the principle behind the rule against drunkenness. Finally, there is a *basic doctrine* or theological affirmation from which the principle is derived, such as, "The ultimate purpose of life is to glorify God."

These distinctions are useful and will be employed in this study from time to time. However, the more primitive and practical concept of the norm as a model or pattern seems to communicate better what Scripture says on the subject. As will be evident, this is the primary meaning we will give to the word in our discussion.

## I. THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL NORMS

What are the norms by which we Christians should live? What do these norms do for us? How do they work? Where are they located?

### A. Indicating God's Will

God has not remained silent about the kind of people He wants us to be. He has expressed Himself clearly on this subject, not only by word but also by deed and example. He has given us a vision of Christian personhood. He has conveyed a *sense*, an impression, of how we are to think, feel, and act.

The directions or norms that He has given us are more like the counsel and example of a parent than, for example, like a tough set of laws given by a dictator to his subjects. These directions describe concretely the kind of persons we can and should be. They are far more than an abstract set of moral principles, rules, or virtues. These norms are not ends in themselves, but are means by which God gives us a vision of the character and values which He wants to form in us.

### B. Reflecting the Needs of Human Nature

The God who made human beings knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that certain types of behavior are

destructive and that other types are beneficial to us individually and collectively. He incorporates these insights into human nature in the biblical ethical norms. He commands and requires what is best for us.

His norms are not arbitrary and they are not punitive. To repeat the analogy used in chapter 2, they are the manufacturer's guidelines for the proper operation and maintenance of the product. There are exceptional situations in which these norms do not appear to be good and helpful, in which conforming to them might even appear to be harmful and unjust. However, in the long run and on the whole, their validity is sustained. Even if, in an extreme case, an exception must be made, the exception does not negate the rule.

### C. Revealed by the Holy Spirit

Even corrupt and fallen human beings possess an intuitive sense of what God requires, a lingering realization of right and wrong. However, this perception is fragmentary, incomplete, obscured and darkened by sin. To compensate for this, God has clearly and powerfully revealed in the Bible what human beings should and should not do. He specifically defines good and evil, commands good behavior, and condemns what is evil.

Although written by men, the Bible is the authentic and authoritative Word of God. Its primary purpose is to communicate the Good News of forgiveness through the blood and death of Jesus. However, an important subordinate purpose is to reveal ethical norms, to give us an understanding of God's will for our lives.

### D. Complemented by the Spirit's Guidance

God is the source of ethical norms. He, not we, decides what is right and what is wrong to do. Through the Holy Spirit He has given us the Bible, in which there are down-to-earth, specific ethical guidelines. However, the Spirit gives us more than a book to rely on—even more than an inspired and inerrant book. He also gives us Himself.

The Holy Spirit is personally present and active in the inner being of each Christian. One of the important functions that He performs is to help the Christian know and understand the



Father's will. We do not have only the letter of the law, we also have the living and personal direction of the Spirit from within. God's written will and the personal guidance of the Spirit are not at odds with each other. They function in a complementary manner. The ethical norms written in the Scripture are the work of the Holy Spirit through the biblical authors. Furthermore, the inner guidance which the Spirit gives is consistent with and explicative of these written norms.

### E. Counteracting Corrupting Influences

As we try to follow our natural knowledge of God's will and even the inner guidance of the Spirit, we are constantly being confused and misdirected by the forces of evil in and around us. They lead us to rationalize, to convince ourselves at times that evil is good and that good is evil. They lead us to ignore or evade the Spirit's guidance. This accounts for much of the ethical confusion we experience and much of the immoral conduct into which we lapse.

Through the written norms of Scripture the Holy Spirit clears away much of this confusion and exposes the rationalizations to which we are inclined. For example, for the Christian who is toying with the idea of having an illicit sexual relationship on the grounds that it would really be a loving and beautiful thing to do, that no one would be hurt by it, that both parties would only be enriched and helped, that the act would actually be a grateful celebration of God-given sexuality, all such attractive and plausible fabrications are shattered by a clear, strong biblical norm: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

### F. Fixed Points of Reference

To find your way across a body of water or a wilderness area you need some fixed points of reference—a star, a distinctive mountain peak, an island, or a reliable compass. Christian ethical norms function in the same way. They are not road maps which chart each foot of the way, or complete blueprints of the Christian life. Rather, they are reliable signposts and markers in strategic areas of life indicating the direction in which we are to go.

The Christian life is a journey through strange, confusing,

and often dangerous terrain. The world in which we live changes rapidly and drastically. We are faced with many new and difficult moral decisions. We are confronted with a wide variety of ethical opinions and moral practices, many of which are contradictory. It is all too easy to become disoriented and to lose our way. In the midst of all this change, confusion, and contradiction, God has established some definite and permanent guideposts. If we fix our attention on them and follow them, we will not wander far afield, but rather will be moving in the direction that God wants us to go.

## II. BIBLICAL FORMS OF ETHICAL NORMS

Where in the Bible do we find these divinely revealed ethical norms? How are they expressed? In what forms do they appear? What is their essential context?

### A. The Ten Commandments

The Bible contains a great deal of ethical instruction and many moral directives. From Genesis to Revelation we find material which may be classified as ethical norms. A convenient and authoritative summary of this material is given in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20). Both Jesus and Paul employ the Decalogue in this way, as a summary. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5—7) is, in some respects, an interpretation and intensification of the Ten Commandments. The same can be said of many sections in the New Testament Epistles which are devoted to moral guidance.

Ethical instruction is not the main purpose of the Ten Commandments. God's law is, first of all, a diagnostic instrument to expose and condemn sin in preparation for the gospel. However, to the person who is forgiven and empowered by the Holy Spirit through faith in the gospel, the law is also a moral guide, a norm for Christian behavior.

### B. Love As Biblical Norm

God expresses His will for our lives in many ways. These requirements are pulled together and stated briefly in the Ten



Commandments. But it is possible and appropriate to express His will for us even more concisely than the Decalogue does. Both Jesus and Paul make it clear that *love* is the essence of the commandments of God (Mark 12:30-31 and Rom. 13:9).

The Ten Commandments and all other biblical ethical norms are, in the final analysis, simply describing different ways of acting in love. They are specific and concrete explanations of what it means to be loving in a variety of relationships and circumstances. As was mentioned in chapter 1, God made us in His image, to be like Him. Since His character and conduct are manifestations of love, ours are to be also. In a word, His will for us is that we love. Love manifests itself in many different forms; in the various biblical norms God describes and prescribes what love will do.

### C. Christian Imperatives

The moral instructions of the New Testament addressed to believers may be termed "Christian imperatives." The form of these imperatives as well as their contents are very similar to the Decalogue. Like the Old Testament commandments, these New Testament imperatives express God's will for the lives of human beings, and they express this will in terms of, "Do this!" and "Do not do that!" However, there are some significant differences between the Decalogue and Christian imperatives.

Christian imperatives are combined with or based upon gospel affirmations. At times, though to a lesser degree, the Old Testament also attaches gospel motivation to statements of God's will. In the case of the New Testament imperatives, however, the relationship to the gospel is much more explicit and emphatic.

This is an important point, and a rather difficult one to explain and to grasp. To say that gospel motivation is combined with a statement of God's moral will is not meant to suggest a confusion of law and gospel. In a Christian imperative the law (imperative) and the gospel remain distinct. Although they function together, gospel does not become law, nor the law gospel. The imperative element remains a statement of God's unbending will. As such, it continues to reveal and condemn our sins.

The law *always* condemns. To an unforgiven sinner the law *only* accuses, but to the sinner who is forgiven and transformed by faith in Jesus Christ, the law of God *also* informs and instructs

in good works. To those who believe and are motivated by the gospel, God's expressed will becomes a helpful guide for moral living and a statement of their potential as new persons in Jesus Christ. "Thou shalt" becomes also "Thou mayest!"

What in this presentation is called "Christian imperatives" is really nothing other than God's law proclaimed to Christians for moral instruction, along with the gospel motivation which enables them to begin to be and to do what God requires. As was explained in chapter 2, only the gospel of God's love can implement the kinds of changes which God wants to bring about in us. The law has no power to change us in a way that makes us acceptable to God. In Christian imperatives God's commands are expressed along with the motivating message of His love. An example of a Christian imperative taken from the New Testament is, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another [imperative], as God in Christ forgave you [gospel motivation]" (Eph. 4:32, RSV).

It is essential in this connection to keep in mind what justification and sanctification are and how they are related. Justification is God's gift of pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ. Sanctification is God's gift of new personhood, also for the sake of Christ. Both are vital elements of the gospel. They are always given simultaneously. You cannot have one without the other. It is as much a part of the Good News to say, "Through God's grace you can change for the better," as it is to say, "Because of what Jesus did and endured, God does not hold your sins against you."

This does not mean that justification and sanctification are equally important. In the Christian message, justification is preeminent. God changes people for the better because He forgives them, but not *vice versa*. Sanctification is a result, not a cause, of justification. However, this does not mean that sanctification is optional or dispensable. It is an integral part of the gospel. To present New Testament imperatives as new possibilities which are part of God's gracious work in the believer is simply to proclaim God's gift of sanctification.

### D. Examples from Scripture

Not only expository and hortatory sections of Scripture, but also historical and biographical sections contain guidance for the Christian life. Ethical norms, both positive and negative, are



embodied in these biblical descriptions of persons. Lydia, for example, is a model of generosity (Acts 16:15), Abraham, a model of faith (Rom. 4), and Peter and John models of boldness in witnessing (Acts 4).

Material of this kind, however, must be interpreted very carefully, for the Bible is realistic in its portrayals. Even the heroes of faith are presented along with their faults (Abraham, Moses, Samson, Peter, James, John, and so on). And the villains are sometimes described as having some commendable traits (Egyptian neighbors of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus, Pharisees, Herod Antipas, and so on).

What God approves and disapproves in these people is not always made explicit. Moral examples in Scripture are, generally speaking, more illustrative than definitive. They must be understood, verified, and interpreted in the light of the Ten Commandments and Christian imperatives. To attempt to derive an ethical norm only from an example, without clarification and support from an explicit biblical command, is questionable.

#### E. Christian Traits

In many places the New Testament writers describe and commend certain attitudes, values, and virtues which are characteristically Christian. We are presented with certain traits and told that this is the way Christians are and should be. Explicitly or implicitly it is indicated that these traits are both gifts of God's grace and goals toward which we are to strive. We are to try to be this way and can to some extent become this way because of God's justifying and sanctifying work.

For example, Paul speaks of the "fruits of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22), and "the mind of Christ," which is characterized by self-emptying humility, sacrificial service, obedience unto death (Phil. 2:1-11). In both passages Paul not only describes what is already in the Christian, but also what ought to be there.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus also pictures and promotes distinctive Christian attitudes, values, and behavior. Those are blessed, He says, who are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness (Matt. 5:1-10). Statements such as these

(and there are many others in the New Testament as well) are not intended as complete descriptions of Christian behavior, or a total system of Christian values and virtues. Rather, they appear to be significant, powerful, provocative *sketches* of Christian personality. They are more like portraits than photographs and more like artistic, literary statements than clinical, scientific statements.

However, they are clearly meant to serve, in some sense, as ethical norms. They provide us with a vision, a model, of the kinds of persons which we can and should become because of God's gracious work for us and in us.

### III. LIMITATIONS OF SCRIPTURE ETHICAL NORMS

The ethical norms revealed in Scripture, though valuable, reliable, and authoritative, are not exhaustive. Furthermore, they cannot always be applied directly to us and our decisions. We must be as aware of their limitations and how to respond to them as we are aware of their importance and potential. It is as much a mistake to expect too much of these norms as it is to expect too little.

#### A. Scriptural Norms Do Not Cover All Situations

In the Bible God has not answered all of our ethical questions, nor has He resolved all of our moral problems. Many issues with which we struggle simply were not present in biblical times. Contraception, genetic manipulation, "easy" abortion, prolongation of the dying process, women's liberation, social responsibility in a democracy, management and labor disputes, complex economic problems, widespread environmental pollution—these are only a few of the moral issues which are unique to the modern era.

Rapidly accelerating technological and social changes present us with an almost infinite variety of new possibilities, many of which include unprecedented and bewildering moral problems. Scripture simply does not speak directly and unequivocally to all of these issues. God has, in fact, left many areas of life uncharted, and these areas appear to be increasing.

Why has God permitted this to happen? Why has He not



supplied us with a set of norms complete enough to cover all moral issues which we might ever face? Scripture nowhere addresses itself to this question. However, if we consider God's basic manner of relating to us, as revealed in Scripture, an answer is suggested. God is interested in far more than external conformity to His commands. He is interested in the free and willing obedience that grows out of love for Him. He is also interested that we mature spiritually and morally. He does not want to make all of our decisions for us. Rather, He wants to teach us how to make our own decisions freely and responsibly in such a way that they are, nevertheless, consistent with His will.

Like a parent preparing a child for life, God gives us many specific injunctions as well as some basic ethical principles, and these are binding. Furthermore, through the incarnation of His Son He has given us a living human example of what we are to be like. Together, these expressions of God's will form a model, a vision, of Christian personhood toward which we are to grow. A child maturing into responsible adulthood gains from the instruction and example of parents, not only a set of rules for living, but a developing feel, or sense, for what is right, even in new situations which the parents never faced or even discussed with the child. Similarly, God, through the ethical norms and the example of Christ recorded in the Bible, shapes and develops within us a sense of and feel for His will, which also helps us find our way through those uncharted areas of life, those puzzling new issues not covered in the Bible.

### B. Some Scriptural Norms Are Culturally and Historically Conditioned

It is incorrect to assume that every command of God recorded in Scripture is applicable to us today. Some were meant only for certain people and for specific situations. Some have subsequently been withdrawn or changed.

For example, the third commandment, requiring worship and rest on the seventh day, was reinterpreted and changed in the New Testament. Many other ritual and even some moral regulations of the Old Testament have been rescinded (Col. 2:16). They were originally given as signs and reminders pointing ahead to Christ. Now that He has come, they are no longer relevant or binding.

A different kind of example is the ancient requirement enforced by God that a man become a father by his brother's widow, if the brother dies childless (Gen. 38:8 and Deut. 35:5-10). There is no reason to believe that this rule applies in the New Testament era. It was never specifically withdrawn, but it was never reaffirmed, either. Consequently, it never became a functioning ethical norm for Christians.

Even certain New Testament regulations are generally disregarded in our day because of their changed significance. The apostles, for example, instructed Christian women not to decorate themselves with fancy hairstyles, expensive clothing, or jewelry, but rather concentrate on the inner beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:3) and good deeds (1 Tim. 2:9-10). In first-century culture, the women who decorated themselves with fine clothing and jewelry projected an image of immodesty and extravagance. In our culture, although extreme decoration may project the same image, moderate use of these adornments indicates nothing more than stylishness and good grooming. Hence, few contemporary Christians follow the apostolic instructions strictly.

Finally, the commandment to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28) has a different significance in the late twentieth century on an overcrowded planet than it did at the dawn of creation when the world was not populated.

We must carefully study the moral imperatives of Scripture to determine if and to what extent they may be culturally and historically conditioned, and thus limited in their applicability.

### C. Not All Scriptural Norms Are Universally Binding

Some imperative biblical statements are clearly not intended to be taken literally: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. . . . If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. . ." (Matt. 5:29-30, RSV). Other imperative statements apply only to certain people. For example, a certain group of ascetics in the Old Testament called *Nazarites* were forbidden to cut their hair, use alcoholic beverages, or have contact with the dead (Num. 6:1-5), but others were not bound by these restrictions. Also, Jesus commanded a certain rich young ruler to sell all he had and give it to the poor (Matt. 19:16), but He did not require this of all His followers. We must carefully study biblical ethical imperative



statements to determine whether or not they are ethical norms for us.

#### D. Scriptural Norms Occasionally Appear Conflicting or Harmful

In some cases biblical norms appear to conflict with one another. For example, the fourth commandment says that you should honor your father and mother. However, Jesus says, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26, RSV). And, although the law of Moses required that an adulterous person be stoned, Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery and encouraged her accusers to suspend punishment (John 8:1-11). We are commanded to speak the truth (Eph. 4:25), and we are also commanded to be kind one to another (v. 32). But sometimes the truth hurts or even threatens to destroy other people. In cases like these, careful study and evaluation is necessary to determine which norm applies.

Since biblical ethical norms do have their limitations, we must learn how to discern which norms are relevant and binding and which are not. We must also learn how to make ethical decisions when there are no clear and binding norms. We must develop a strong and growing sense of what the will of God is. This can be accomplished through continuous and thorough Bible study. By close and constant contact with God's written law and the disclosure of His love we can acquire a feel, an instinct, for what God wills in a situation not discussed directly in Scripture.

This feel is not something that we create by our own powers of perception or invention, but rather the Holy Spirit creates it as He comes to us through the Word. This sense of the will of God is derived from the two basic elements of God's Word—both the law and the gospel. First of all, it is derived from that model or vision of Christian personhood based on the biblical expressions of God's will. Second, it is derived from the mind and heart of the new person being formed in us by the Holy Spirit through the message of God's love in Christ. By means of the law (norms) the Spirit constructs the model. By means of the gospel He reforms us into the kind of people who can understand and conform to the model, even in new and bewildering situations.

In short, although biblical ethical norms have their limitations, they are not invalid or inoperative.

#### IV. VALIDITY OF ETHICAL NORMS FOR THE CHRISTIAN

Some Christians, including some evangelicals, reject the entire concept of binding ethical norms (see preface and introduction). Those who take this position argue that biblical moral directives (God's laws) were given only to expose and condemn sin, not to guide behavior. Consequently, they say, to attempt to use the law for moral instruction is to abuse it. They also claim that because the Christian has the Holy Spirit within, he does not need written norms. The Spirit guides him directly from within; he knows what is right and wrong without external instruction. In the third place, they assert that to impose or rely upon written norms is to curtail (or forfeit) the freedom of the gospel, which is also freedom from the law.

However, both Scripture and historic Protestant theology make extensive use of God's revealed will as norms for the Christian life. Both Jesus and Paul tell Christians how to live on the basis of the commandments. Furthermore, the Reformers relate most of their moral instruction to the explanation of the Decalogue. In addition, the Spirit's inner guidance in no way obviates the value or necessity of written norms. The same Spirit who guides the Christian from within is the ultimate source of the biblical ethical norms. And, although He does instruct from within, He also instructs through the written law.

Finally, when Scripture and the Reformers speak of freedom from the law, they do not mean freedom from the law as an ethical norm. Rather, they teach that Christ has set us free from the law in three ways, none of which conflicts with or excludes the concept of the law as an ethical norm: Christ frees us (1) from the curse and condemnation of the law; (2) from the necessity of justifying ourselves by means of the law; (3) from the law's coercion. This is not freedom to ignore, reject, or violate the law of God. Rather, it is freedom to begin to fulfill the law joyfully and willingly by the power which God Himself supplies.