

Davis, John Jefferson. *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2004. 359 pp. \$17.99.

### **Love The Lord With All Your Mind**

John Jefferson Davis, professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, offers a biblical perspective on the many complicated “issues facing the church today” in his survey of Christian ethics. Though his 2004 edition has dated statistics running throughout, his line of argument is genuinely evangelical and generally quite helpful. Time and time again, he makes his case from the Scriptures and draws firm conclusions in a world that seeks to constantly relativize truth and the Bible.

His introductory chapter on decision-making presents a good model for thinking through the complexities of Christian ethics and offers three essential presuppositions for advancing Christian truth in an age of pluralistic uncertainty. First, he upholds the authority of the Bible. “Evangelical ethics is concerned not with *personal* preferences and feelings, but with [Scriptural] obligations that command the conscience” (16, emphasis mine). Second, in humble submission to the word of God, empirical data can be processed to determine the wisest course of action. He writes, “while human reason plays an essential role in evangelical ethics, that role is not autonomous one” (17). Human reason functions as a “servant of divine revelation in the application of biblical truth” (17).

With this firm foundation in place, Davis proffers a third presupposition concerning conflicting obligations in Christian ethics. He denies any variable “situation ethic,” affirming the absolute nature of God’s command and the promise that God always provides a way of escape (1

Cor. 10:13). Thus, he advocates a “contextual absolutism” (20). He remarks, “Some normal or *prima facie* duties may not be actual duties when all things are taken into consideration... occasionally a higher obligation suspends a lower one” (21). He illustrates this with the case of the Hebrew midwives insubordination to Pharaoh, where these faithful women obeyed God rather than man. Though much more could be said concerning this issue of conflicting obligations, its concession about the difficulty of ethics is helpful because it openly concedes the dilemmas facing Christians wanting to make right choices in a fallen world. When competing evils are at odds with one another and when fallen, human reason—even reason informed by divine revelation—is strained to make clear decisions, it must be admitted that some decisions will be less than ideal. Though always, there is an ethical course of action that falls under God’s sovereign control and aims to comply with God’s ethical standards. Such situations must drive the believer to the Word of God and prayer for wisdom (James 1:5-8).

Yet, despite all of these helpful foundations for establishing moral and ethical decisions, there is one more I would add. One that became increasingly needful for me, as I read this book. That prerequisite is a Spirit-given love for truth. Reading through Davis’ chapters on contraception, capital punishment, and the like, it became increasingly clear that my heart lacked the “religious affections” necessary to combat these real-world immoralities. What I noticed as I read each chapter was a growing awareness of the conditions in the world, a hearty agreement with the biblical evidence presented, and a moral evaluation of these issues that would be considered to be conservative and evangelical. At the same time, I began noticing that while my beliefs were in agreement with Scripture, my affections were simply lacking.

For instance, in the chapter on infanticide and euthanasia, I could easily concur with the arguments for the sanctity of life, yet my heart lacked sympathy for the dying patient or anger

for those seeking to bring about the death of innocent children or elderly citizens made in God's image. In other words, while my mind comprehended the ethics, my heart was too sluggish to grieve or flash with outrage at the injustice(s) being done. This spiritual leprosy, a calloused indifference to issues disconnected from my present life, demonstrated to me a spiritual deficit. It also showed me that theoretical ethics varies greatly from pastoral ethics, that ethics "out there" must be appropriated by prayer and meditation on God's word to become my own personal ethics.

2 Thessalonians 2:10 says of those awaiting judgment that they "refused to love the truth and so be saved;" Zechariah 8:19 commands the people of God to "love truth;" and 1 Corinthians 13:6 says that love "does not rejoice with wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth." All of these passages emphasize that truth is not just known and believed, but it is to be loved. There is a holy requisite that what we believe, we ought to cherish as lovely. Jonathan Edwards called these spiritual-emotional responses "religious affections." Clearly, to know Christian ethics is not the same as loving like Christ.

This sad revelation of my own heart's condition has personal and pastoral implications. Personally, it once again shows that knowledge does not suffice for Christ-like conformity. Ethics, and all of life, is more than finding pertinent Bible passages, sifting through the verses, and making a quick decision. Instead, prayer and dependence on God must be the impetus that mobilizes true Christian repentance. Currently, while reading many of these chapters, my response was often one of confession and personal repentance. In the future, when times of ethical deliberation come, Jehoshaphat's cry must be my own, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron. 20:12). Moreover, prayer for God to prick my heart over issues like abortion, euthanasia, and civil injustice must accompany a life lived for Christ.

Pastorally, reading this book and thinking about what drives our ethical decisions, it convicted me that I often view pastoral ministry as a simple ministry of conveying information. Though the gospel ministry is a ministry of teaching and disciple-making (Matt. 28:19-20), this process is not simply accomplished through bits and bytes of information neatly packaged and downloaded. Teaching ethics is more than understanding the issues and seeing what the Bible says about it. It is having a heart that weeps over a wicked city like Jesus' did; it is having a body that tenses with outrage at the injustice of African genocide; it is having an imagination that envisions the horrors that follow a woman's choice to have an abortion; it is not just knowing the golden rule, but being ruled by a heart that loves people and hates sin's effect on the world.

This kind of commitment to sanctification and seeing Christ in a world filled with ethical dilemmas, and pointing people to him for comfort, compliance, and conformity must be my pastoral obligations now and in the future. So often, I have viewed preaching as a content dump, dispensing biblical information like a half-filled Pez dispenser, opening my mouth to only give a percentage of what they need. I have aimed at information, more than I have prayed for transformation, but while reading Davis' book, I have seen that information alone is insufficient. Therefore, reading *Evangelical Ethics* has been helpful, not only in helping me formulate my positions on many ethical problems, but in helping me see the need to love the truth. May the Lord continue to shape my heart so that it loves good and hates evil, that it grieves over sin and rejoices over Christ-like conformity, and may God's spirit so work in me until he completes his task (Phil. 1:6) and brings about ethical renewal in my heart.