

Morality of Presence: A Biblical and Salesian Perspective¹

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Biblical Perspective

Very often when we think of Old Testament morality, we generally have the impression that it must have been very legalistic, stressing obedience to an external law and rule of action. Perhaps this view is very heavily influenced legalism and formalism of the scribes and the Pharisees of his day who reduced the whole law to a strict, unbending external conformity to ritualistic practices.

If we try to understand the significance of the Law, especially of the Ten Commandments by placing them in their original context and setting, we will see that the legalism associated with the observance of the Law is a distortion of what the observance of the Ten Commandments was intended to achieve.

There is a deep fission in modern society between religion and morality. Morality is al psychology of the agent, his complex affectivity and connatural perceptions of moral facts² More primitive societies could not easily conceive of morality apart from religion. The great genius of the Ancient Israelites lay in their effort toward the creation of a religious morality. The Ten Commandments may be more honored in the breach than in the observance, but they cannot be forgotten nor ignored. They are indelibly engraved in the consciousness of Western man.

The covenant relationship that God established with his chosen people places all aspects secreation to God. It gives all life a religious significance. The Ten Commandments have lost most of their impact today primarily because they have been taken out of their original context which was primarily and essentially religious. To place them in their original historical and religious setting should help to heal the rift

Hebrew morality contrasts sharply with the Greek ethical view. The purpose of Hebrew personal sense of the active presence of God as [a] *sine qua non* of their very life as a
⁸ Present day Christian ethics has been heavily influenced by the moral psychology of the Greeks and has not sufficiently exploited the morality of presence as embodied

Salesian Morality of Presence

Although not completely free from the ethical striving and search for the good that is so characteristic of Greek ethics, Salesian spirituality stresses the morality of presence, the morality of union, in short, the morality of love. This is especially evident in St. Francis de Sales' *Treatise on the Love of God*. It is the value, the goodness, the power of all our virtuous actions:

The Holy Spirit dwells in us if we are living members of Jesus Christ, who therefore [John 15:5]. Theotimus, this is because one who abides in him partakes of his divine life and draws from its waters unto life everlasting.⁹

The morality of presence looks more to the person commanding than to the command itself. The motivation for observing the command is not obedience to some external rule but the desire to please and be united to the one who commands. It places its major emphasis on love and not on obedience as the primary reason for its moral life. In a key passage of Book XI and of De Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the perspective is strongly emphasized:

Even though love is commanded and in loving we thus practice obedience, still love does not derive its perfection from obedience but from the goodness of him whom it loves. Love is not excellent because it is obedient but because it is love of an excellent good....Its perfection does not consist in the fact that when we love we are obedient, but rather in the fact that when we obey we love.¹⁰

Of course, De Sales does not want to disparage obedience, but rather to indicate the importance of love. He refers to this elsewhere: "The obedience of love is the perfection of love."

Thus, too, conformity of our heart with that of God is brought about when by holy benevolence we cast all our affections into the hands of his divine will so that they

⁸ Jonsen, 443.

may be turned and directed as he chooses and shaped and formed according to his good pleasure. In this point, consists the most profound obedience of love, since it

Spiritual lovers, spouses of the heavenly King, do indeed from time to time contemplate themselves upon brooks of waters in order to see if they are adorned so as to please their Beloved. This is done by examinations of conscience, by which they cleanse, purify, and beautify themselves as well as they can, not in order to be perfect, not to satisfy themselves, not from a desire to make progress in virtue, but out of obedience to the Bridegroom out of the reverence they have for him, and the fervent desire which they have to please him. Now, is not that a love pure, simple, and unalloyed, since they do not adorn themselves in order to be beautiful, but only to please the Beloved? So much so that if ugliness were equally agreeable to him, they would love it as much as beauty.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Spiritual Conferences*, 228.