

## **ETHICS OR 'ETHOS' – OUR HOME**

**By J. Sergio Fortes**

Ethics presents one of the contemporary challenges facing people in the business and professional world. With its origins in ancient Greece, under the name of ethos, ethics literally means "our place while human" and "the place where we live." That is to say, from a Greek perspective, ethos (or ethics) can be viewed as "our home." Or as my friend, Samy Staschower, prefers to say: "What we are."

Those of us who have reached the age of 50 or beyond now can better understand the serious conversations we had with our parents when they would state emphatically, "Here in this home, this shall not be done." They were busy establishing for us what our family ethics should be – what type of behavior was acceptable and unacceptable in our homes.

"Our place" as humans encompasses marriage to our spouse, the residence where we live, the social group in which we participate, the society in which we live, the city and neighborhood where we reside, the place where we worship, and the company or organization where we earn our livelihood.

The brilliant Brazilian philosopher and educator, Dr. Mario Sergio Cortella, offers a concise, masterful conceptualization of ethics. He says, "It is the set of principles and values that we use to answer three major questions of human life: What do I want? What should I do? What can I do?"

Cortella continues, noting, "There are things we want, but we should not. There are things that we should want or do, but we cannot. There are things we can, but we do not want to." Such dilemmas permeate our everyday lives, invading the intimacy of our business relationships and holding the secret motivations underlying our professional actions.

The question is, how are we to react to these issues – wanting things we should not, not being able to do things we should do, and not wanting to do things we know we should? Experience has taught me the best source for answering these questions is to consult the book more than one person has called the "manufacturer's manual" – the Holy Bible. In wrestling with often difficult, sometimes confusing ethical matters, it helps to ask, "What does the Bible have to say about this?"

When we do what we want, according to the Apostle Paul, rather than doing something that down deep we know to be the right thing to do, it is usually because of being dominated by an inner force that the Bible calls "sin": "Now if I do what I do not desire to do, it is not myself that acts, but the sin which dwells within me fixed and operating in my soul" (Romans 7:20).

One of the concepts of sin I learned – I cannot remember from whom – is that "sin is hitting the wrong target." In other words, we know what we should do, but despite our best efforts in trying to accomplish it, we miss the correct target.

The divine antidote, God's remedy for sin, is called forgiveness. There are those that contend, "If we say that we are free from sin, we are only fooling ourselves." However, according to the Bible, that statement is incorrect. If we admit our sins and confess, God promises to be quick to respond and restore us to right standing with Him: "He is faithful and true to His own nature and promises and will forgive our sins and continuously cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9).

To do ethics – to protect "our place" or our "home" – is more than having the intention to follow a primer of good practices, values and fundamental principles. We know it also goes beyond the simple desire and effort of our will, because our will – our self-determination – often fails. It requires change from the inside. And that kind of change only Jesus can accomplish in us.

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### **Reflection/Discussion Questions**

1. How would you define or describe your understanding of what ethics is, in a practical sense?
2. What did you think of the original concept of ethics, taken from the ancient Greek term that means, "the place where we live"? When you are faced with an ethical decision at work, do you see it as affecting "the place where you live"?
3. In your opinion, what are the factors that lead a person to stop doing what they know is right and choose instead to act according to what they recognize as the opposite – the wrong thing to do?
4. The writer of this "Monday Manna" suggests the force (or influence) that drives people to do what they really do not want to do, as well as not to do the things they really want to do, is what the Bible calls "sin." Do you agree? Why or why not?

If you would like to look at or discuss other Bible passages related to the theme, here are some you might want to consider:

Proverbs 4:23; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Mathew 5:37; 7:12; Mark 12:17; Philippians 4:5