

Ten Principles of Highly Ethical People**by David W. Gill (2002)**

Published in Radix Magazine, Vol 29 Number 2 (2002): 4-7, 27-30.

Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), got my attention several years ago. For one thing, here was some simple, classic wisdom converted into a perennial best-seller (why can't I do that?). Second: who says that *these seven* habits are the ones that make people effective? (my contrarian personality automatically looked for an eighth essential habit---or a way to throw out one of the proposed seven). Third: why is *effectiveness* the goal of our habits? Isn't this just selling out again to technological thinking (driven as it is by the criterion of measurable effectiveness). Still, on balance I admired the book, my contrariety notwithstanding.

To my way of thinking, however, it's not nearly as important to be *effective* as to be *ethical*. After all, people like Hitler and Bin Laden have been effective in some ways. The real question is "effective for what?" What are the results effected by our actions and habits?

To be *ethical* means to do the *right* thing, not just the *effective* thing. To be ethical is to strive to bring about the *good* thing---even if we are not notably effective in doing so. All other things being equal, of course, we would like to be effective---in the sense that our efforts produce the results we intended. Being ineffective is no virtue. But being effective is only a virtue when it is in turn controlled by higher values----doing what is right and good.

This, of course, raises the question of what qualifies something as *ethical*. What makes something *right* and *good*? One classic answer is that it *protects people from harm*. The first principle of the ancient Hippocratic Oath for physicians was "do no harm." Ethics, in this classic tradition, is about protecting people from harm and enabling them to live out their lives in healthy freedom. What is ethical/moral is what is good for people and planet; what is unethical/immoral is what is harmful for people and planet. The great religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity actually support this view of ethics, in my opinion. That is, they are "realist" rather than "nominalist" about good and evil. Despite the way it sometimes appears, their ethical commands are not arbitrary declarations by an authoritarian God but rather divine guidance about what is really, truly good (or bad) for us.

From Ellul & Kierkegaard to Thomas Aquinas & Aristotle

I wouldn't have always been able to write this essay. For a couple decades I was under the spell of the radical existentialist theological ethics of Jacques Ellul and (his philosophical hero) Soren Kierkegaard. I believed very passionately in the idea that God's ways were in radical contrast to this lost world. Thus, in a world of conflict, God was for peace; in place of competition, collaboration; in place of compromise, fidelity; in place of realism, a fierce idealism; in place of the crowd, the individual; and so on. Long before "post-modernism" was named, my friends and I were relentlessly anti-modern. We believe that the "politics of Jesus" (as one of our teachers, John Howard Yoder, wrote of it) was a politics of radical otherness.

Those counter-cultural themes still need to be sounded, perhaps more than ever in our conformist milieu. But over the past twenty years I have come to believe that while the ethics of Jesus are *radically different from the culture* around us they are, at the same time, in *profound touch with our fundamental human nature*. Our culture, to put it another way, is not only radically out of touch with God, it is radically out of touch with our basic humanity. Thus, the ethics of Jesus and Scripture are not just a guide to what it means to be fully sanctified and set apart from this world, they are a guide to being fully human.

While I continue to value highly the prophetic insights of Kierkegaard, Barth, Ellul, and Yoder, I now also have a much greater appreciation of the work of Thomas Aquinas and (his philosophical hero) Aristotle---both of whom thought of ethics as closely related to our basic human nature.

But my mind wasn't really changed by reading arguments; it was changed by life experience. As I taught the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes to people in the business world, I began to realize that I had lightning in my hands. Of course, the basic principles and themes of such classic biblical texts have their greatest impact when a personal relationship with God and the community of faith is the foundation. Nevertheless, these principles and values illuminated the lives of non-believers as well. They had "aha" experiences, as well, when they studied these texts.

The Decalogue in a New Idiom

In this essay, I propose "Ten Principles of Highly Ethical People." What this really amounts to is a restatement of the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue). I am not at all arguing that this formulation should replace the biblical one. What I am arguing is that the Decalogue *implies* a statement of humanistic ethical principles like mine. My list of principles is one step removed from the biblical revelation (to be only a step away is a virtue in this case!).

I am also not arguing that the original authors of the text (Moses & Co.) had this application in mind. Maybe they did. Maybe not. But while authorial intention is important, the meaning of texts is not confined to what was consciously in the heads of the original authors. Texts have a life of their own and sometimes acquire meanings that are more powerful than their authors could have imagined. Of course, neither can we twist texts to mean just anything we want. Every interpretation needs to be critically examined---and I welcome such criticism of my approach.

Another context for understanding my project is the historical debate about the "use of the Law" in the Christian life. The Protestant Reformers agreed that the biblical Law (with the Decalogue at the center) had an ongoing "first use"---as a "schoolmaster to lead people to Christ" in the Pauline language. This Law acts sets a standard of behavior against which people realize their shortcomings and seek a Savior and Redeemer. The Law also had an ongoing "second use"---as a fundamental political guideline setting boundaries for community life. Thus, all human communities must prohibit murder, theft, adultery, libel, etc. (It has been a little harder for governments to enforce Sabbath laws or prohibitions against idolatry and covetousness!).

The Reformation (and post-Reformation) debate was about the "third use" of the law: is it an essential guide for the Christian life? Calvin and the Reformed tradition said "yes." Luther and his followers are often represented as saying "no, the Holy Spirit is a sufficient guide, without the law, in the believer's life." In truth, Luther's position was not so simple. One of the best discussions of the Decalogue and the Christian life is Luther's own "Larger Catechism." My position is very much a "yes" on this third use. I don't view Law and Gospel as being in fundamental conflict. I like Karl Barth's formulation, that "the Law is the form of the Gospel" and "the Gospel is the content of the Law."

But I want to go further and propose what is, in effect, a "fourth use" of the law. This is the law as guidance for the life of all human beings, not just for the community of faith, and not just as a setting of political boundaries.

Loving God, Loving People Made in God's Image and Likeness

Both the *shema* (Dt 6:5) and Jesus (Mt 22:37) teach that the Law is all about loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Both the "holiness code" (Lv 19:18) and Jesus (Mt 22:39) teach that the Law is about loving one's neighbor as oneself. Where I disagree with the interpretive tradition is the assumption that the first half of the ten commandments are the "love God" commands and the second half the "love neighbor" commands. Rather, I argue, all ten commands are simultaneously ten ways to love God and ten ways to love your neighbor.

Let me give two quick examples of my approach. The first command, "You shall have no other gods before me," is not just good for God, it is an act of love for my neighbor. Why? Because it is good for my neighbor for me not to make money or power my god; it is good for my neighbor for me to maintain the gracious, forgiving Yahweh as my God; it is good for my neighbor that my God is the Creator of all

people, all nations, both sexes---and not some tribal deity. Second example: certainly it is loving to my neighbor that I not kill him or her; but the sixth command is just as certainly about loving God. I must not kill my neighbor, not just because my neighbor wouldn't like it but, because God is the giver of my neighbor's life. I cannot be loving God if I kill those who belong to him.

But there is an even deeper level to the interpretation and application I propose. One of the most basic of all biblical theological affirmations is that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of their Creator-Redeemer God. In some very profound ways, then, men and women are "like" their God. For example, like God, people have a will to create things, a desire for relationships, a value of beauty as well as usefulness, a capacity to communicate by word, and so on.

If this is the case, when we learn the basic movements and components in loving God, we are also learning the basic movements in loving our neighbor-made-in-the-image-of-God. What God wants, we also want in some sense. Of course there are vast differences between the Creator and creature. God is infinite, we are finite; God is holy and perfect, we are blemished and imperfect. But emphasizing only these differences can blind us to the similarities.

One final caveat: even if atheistic humanists were right and the Jewish-Christian God was merely a projection of human wishes and needs, even if Marx was right that religion is the "false expression of a true consciousness" . . . even then I would propose the ten principles that follow in this essay. Even in this cynical, secularist view, these ten principles are at least an expression of the highest humanistic aspirations, reified into transcendent perspective. In truth, I think they are both. Some will say that we created God in our image; others will say that God created us in his image. I have never heard a very good argument for abandoning the latter option but, either way, I believe we are looking at ten fundamental principles and values.

Ten Principles for Highly Ethical Business Leaders

In the following discussion I will present the ten principles with a particular focus on the workplace but also give examples from other areas of our existence. I present both positive and negative formulations.

Principle One: Treat all people as unique, valuable individuals. *Never treat anyone as though they are dispensable, without value, or "just a number."*

The first commandment in the Decalogue is "You shall have no other gods before me." This could also be translated "between me and you." Why is this the first command? What is its essential, core point? In a flash, something occurred to me as I was giving a lecture on the Decalogue to a group of students at UNLV about twenty years ago: this is exactly the first thing that my wife wants from me---to have her place in my life unthreatened by any rivals. (Of course I knew this about marriage before that night---the new insight was that the first movement of love and justice was the *same* for God, for a spouse, for anyone). In the Decalogue, the point is not that there exist no other beings or other objects of interest and affection. The point is that no other *gods* should come between you and your God. Nothing and nobody should be offered the god-place in one's life. Technology, for example, should not be treated with awe and reverence, should not be sacrificed to or bowed down to, should not be adored and exalted, should not be viewed as the Savior and Director of our lives and destinies.

In the case of marriage, you may have other good friends, people you love. But no one should be offered the special place of life-long soul-mate, lover, and unconditionally-intimate life partner that you dedicated and committed to your spouse. While there are many ways of threatening a good marriage, the most threatening of all is to allow a rival to enter the picture, to begin to come between you and your spouse.

This could be called the principle of "exclusivity" or "uniqueness." *The first way you love and care for another is by granting them a special, unique place in your existence and not letting anyone else take that place.* In the case of spouses or lovers the principle is pretty clear. I believe, however, that it also applies to parenting: each of your children must know that they occupy a unique, irreplaceable position in your heart and mind. If they doubt that, the relationship is in trouble.

And in business: each of your employees (and customers and colleagues) is valued first by the way you treat them: are they dispensable, replaceable, “just a number”? People can usually sense whether you notice them and value their individual existence. This is the first act of love for someone but it is also the first movement of justice. Because people are unique, they *deserve*---have a right---to be treated as unique individuals.

By the way: another lesson in basic ethics is embedded in this first commandment and its relationship to the rest of the commandments. This is the point that your “gods determine your goods.” The first command specifies who occupies the god position in your life or community. The “god position” is the center, the ultimate source of meaning and direction, the goal and purpose of life. All the other commandments have their legitimacy and force precisely because they exhibit the character and values of the god established in the first commandment. If your god is Mars, you probably won’t have a sixth command prohibiting murder. If it is Eros, you won’t have the seventh command. If your god is Money, Mammon, you will not have much content left in the commands against stealing or false witness. But if your God is Yahweh or Jesus, these other nine commands acquire power and substance.

Thus, if we want to reform a person or an organization, the place to begin is never with a specific code of ethics but rather with the issue of mission and purpose. Specific rules and guidelines are persuasive to people only when they can clearly be seen in intimate relationship with a purpose, mission, or god, they serve.

Principle Two: Support every individual’s freedom, growth, and development. *Never view anyone through stereotypes and images, or as fixed and unchangeable.*

The second commandment in the Decalogue is “Do not make any idols or graven images.” This issue of idolatry is not the same as the issue of exclusivity and uniqueness raised by the first command. The core issue is life, vitality, and growth. As the prophets saw it, the problem with idolatry was making images not just of false gods but of the true God. The infinite God in Israel could not be reduced to a finite object. Even more, the living God could not be represented by a fixed, mechanical image. (The only valid image of God is born by living men and women). God is alive. God listens, speaks, acts. God even changes his mind according to the Bible. Even if an image could represent in an inspiring way some aspect of God’s reality, it would fail to capture it all. And it would be dead. Part of the problem is elevating something we made into a god; even more serious is the problem of reducing God into something less than God, even less than ourselves.

No wonder then, that human beings (made in God’s image and likeness) deeply resent it whenever they are viewed through the lens of stereotypes and fixed images. Whenever we describe someone as “just a . . . ,” or “always . . . ,” or “only . . . ,” we are imposing an unfair, misleading, dehumanizing image on them. Beware of generalizations and stereotypes. Beware of taking people for granted. Beware of assuming you know someone completely. People change, people grow. People are alive----just like their creator. Thus, in a marriage, in parenting, in a classroom, or in managing employees, the second basic principle of highly ethical people is to create and protect opportunity for people to grow. Rather than assuming that they always know what’s best for an employee, an ethical leader asks, “how would you like to grow in your skills and experiences this year?” “What can I do to help you get where you want to go?” “How can our company unleash you to be all you want to be?”

Principle Three: Communicate to people by name with respect. *Never use or impose demeaning, trivializing, or derogatory names on others.*

The third commandment is “Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God.” Do not take God’s name in a vain or empty fashion. The point of the command is about communication. No relationships of any substance and value can exist without good communication. Pronouncing someone’s name initiates interpersonal communication. Names represent persons, who and what they are. Imposing a trivializing or demeaning name on someone or some group is an act of violence against their reality. Not knowing or making an effort to learn people’s names is a clear indicator that we do not value communication and relationships with them.

God commands people not to misuse his name---that is, to say the name when they don't intend to start a conversation with him or, at least, describe him to others. Profanity, cursing, and falsely swearing oaths in God's name---these are ways of misusing God's name. The proper way to use God's name is to pray, to call upon God, to sing about what he has done, to lament how tough life is and how you wish he would help out.

Good teachers and leaders learn peoples' names and then use them to initiate relationship-building conversations. Ethical people use the names by which people or groups ask to be called (e.g. "women" not "ladies," "David" not "Dave," "African-Americans" not "Negroes," even "San Francisco" not "Frisco"). Naming is an act of power. Let people name themselves.

Principle Four: Model and encourage a balanced life of good work and rest. *Do not adopt policies or make demands on others that undermine balanced lives.*

The fourth command is a double one: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall work." Here the pattern of "what's good for God is good for people made in God's likeness" is made explicit: God worked six and rested the seventh---now you (following God's pattern) work six and rest the seventh. It is a pattern that fits with our nature. Obsessive workaholics are living very twisted lives; they are in no way to be viewed as heroes for doing so (a little ridicule is in order here I think). God *could have* worked on the seventh day . . . *but he didn't!* People *could* work seven days a week, checking email, working on projects at home at night, traveling obsessively, etc.. But it is fundamentally unethical to do so if you are beating up your body and mind in the process and becoming an unbalanced, dehumanized shadow of a fully developed human being. And the relationships that get trashed by obsessive workaholics count heavily as well.

The other side of the principle is that it is built into human nature to need to perform creative and redemptive work six days a week. Designing and making things, organizing, fixing, and healing things---these activities express our humanity. Not to have opportunity to work like this is dehumanizing (hence job creation programs are so important). Not to engage in good work because one is lazy and irresponsible is also an attack on both the self and the community (which has to pick up after us).

At the heart of this double-command is the insight that you care for someone both by *working for* them and by *being with* them. We show love for God (and for others) by working hard for them for six days (roughly) each week. But that is not enough: we also show love to God and others by ceasing our work and being with them for some "quality time" each week. There is lots of evidence in the Bible that one should not be rigorously legalistic about *when* such Sabbaths are observed (Saturday? Sunday? Part of two or three days?)---or *how* they should be observed. The point is to value the principle and invent ways of implanting it. Model it and then help others to pursue it. We treat others ethically when we help them create balanced lives of good work and good rest.

Principle Five: Honor and respect people's families. *Never undervalue the significance of families and friends.*

The fifth commandment is "Honor your father and mother." To "honor" is to treat with "respect, seriousness, and care." "Honor" does not mean "unilaterally obey." Nor does the command imply that mother and father *deserve* this honor because of a superior performance. It is stated as something that God wishes to happen and that will help you live well and long.

The core of this principle is that people do not live well as isolated, detached, individuals. God, to begin there, is a "we" as well as an "I"---"Let us make mankind in our image" the creation story says. Still more, God acts to bring life, truth, and love to people by means of people. Through your mother and father, the idea goes, God brings you life and other good things. And for our part, we need other people to have a decent life. Those first "others" in our little community of life are our parents (according to the plan).

Bottom line for highly ethical people: the fifth principle is to honor and respect the “significant others” of our colleagues and employees. Show interest, design policies, and make decisions that honor, respect, and value the families and friends of others.

Principle Six: Protect people’s life, safety, and health. *Never harm or jeopardize the physical well-being of anyone.*

The sixth through tenth commandments build on the first five by calling attention to five crucial aspects of human existence. By saying “You shall not murder,” the sixth commandment calls attention to our physical life, health, and well-being. Without life and health, nothing else is possible. The Jewish rabbis and biblical expositors, Martin Luther and John Calvin, and many other commentators follow the tradition of seeing each of the ten commandments as representing and symbolizing more than just its formal, narrow topic. Certainly Jesus interpreted the sixth commandment in a broad and deep way in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). Luther argued that this commandment is broken whenever we could protect someone from injury, and don’t.

Highly ethical people protect the life and health of their children, their parents and friends, their employees, customers, neighbors, and those in the generations to come. All of life brings some risk and it is a fantasy to think that an airplane, car, or drug could be risk-free. Ethical people protect others from serious risks to their life, health, and well-being and honestly disclose the facts about the risks that remain. Ethical people do not manufacture vehicles that are highly profitable but have high roll-over rates that are hidden from their purchasers.

Principle Seven: Keep the commitments you make with others. *Never undermine or betray your commitments---or those made between other parties.*

The seventh commandment prohibits adultery which, in its strict sense, is sexual intercourse in which one or both parties are breaking a commitment (a covenant) they made to be sexually faithful to another. (“Fornication” is sex without a covenant commitment; “adultery” is sex which violates an existing commitment). One interesting factoid about the Hebrew word for adultery in the Old Testament is that it is used exactly as many times to describe Israel’s betrayal of its commitment to Yahweh (i.e., its “adultery” with other gods) as it is used for cases of people doing the sexual thing. The core issue is relationship (closely related to the messages of the first command about exclusivity and the fifth command about family and household).

Highly ethical people do whatever they can to carry out the commitments they have made to others---and they support other people’s covenanted relationships (including their sexual/marital fidelity) rather than undermine them. They show themselves to be trustworthy and reliable commitment-keepers. They support constructive, holistic views of others in the workplace, not narrow, reductionist sexualized views. Highly ethical people do not come on sexually to political interns or business journal reporters---or to political leaders or business CEOs.

Principle Eight: Be fair and just in financial matters. *Never tolerate unfair wages, prices, or financial practices.*

The eighth commandment is “Do not steal.” Definitions of property and ownership vary in different times, places, and circumstances. The core principle is, however, as simple as it is essential: do not take for yourself what properly belongs to others. This is not just a legal concept but a moral/ethical one. Just because the law may permit something does not prevent it from being theft in an ethical sense. So too, just because the “market” permits something does not provide an ethical pass on stealing. Highly ethical people have a core principle of assessing whether prices, salary and compensation packages, and other financial transactions are right and good (not just whether they are legal or possible). When ethical people have the opportunity and authority, they use it to promote financial justice and fairness. Of course, ethical people do not break into houses or shoplift. What is not so often said is that ethical people also do not ask for waivers of conflict of interest policies so that they can personally enrich themselves with millions of dollars (with no discernible product or service to show for it)—while deceiving thousands

of their subordinate employees into losing their thousands of dollars set aside for retirement. Adding hypocrisy and arrogance to theft doesn't make it any more ethical.

Principle Nine: Communicate honestly and truthfully. *Never mischaracterize people, products, services, or facts.*

The ninth commandment prohibits "false witness against your neighbor." This principle has to do with honesty and truthfulness. The way it is phrased puts the emphasis on how such communication affects other people. Lying, deception, and dishonesty are not just violations of the "facts" and "reality," they are injuries to our neighbors. Without honesty and integrity, there can be no trust. Without a minimal fabric of trust, human relationships, including commerce, are impossible. *When* to tell the truth, *how* to tell the truth . . . these are often great challenges. But ethical people always strive to avoid any falsehoods that could harm others and choose to live in the light of truthfulness and honesty. Advertising today is perilously close to being institutionalized false witness. When entertainment media fail to portray the extended suffering that accompanies violence, they are guilty of false witness. Political campaigns (whether for candidates or issue legislation) are often filled with false witness that harms people. When church authorities present pedophile pastors or priests as safe, they are guilty of false witness. The list goes on. Highly ethical people don't justify dishonesty, they fight against it, starting with their own communication practices.

Principle Ten: Cultivate a positive attitude toward others and their accomplishments. *Do not give in to envy or the temptation to take credit for the work of others.*

The tenth and final commandment says "do not covet what belongs to your neighbor." This goes a step deeper than theft or adultery, reaching to the level of our desires and the sort of scheming and obsession that too often lead to the acts themselves. Here is another moral principle that could never be converted into a political law. Laws can only govern external words and deeds; ethical principles can guide internal attitudes as well. Attitudes give rise to actions. Racist, sexist, violent attitudes often lead to racist, sexist, violent language and action. Envy can lead to dishonesty and stealing the property of others. The final ethical principle urges positive attitudes toward others and their accomplishments.

The Mosaic Mosaic

The second half of the ten principles covers the basic aspects of human existence: our life and health, our covenanted relationships, the material infrastructure of our life, our reputation and the communications infrastructure of our life, and finally the spiritual/attitudinal infrastructure of human life. It is not exactly a hierarchy of importance (e.g., some people would have rather died than have had their reputations falsely impugned). We could think of it as a hierarchy of "immediacy." That is, the most direct and immediate attack on someone is on their life and health, the least direct is to have a bad attitude about them. In any case, these five principles cover the territory of human life and well-being.

The first five principles are the essential foundation for the second five. For example, our understanding and fulfillment of the principle not to harm but to protect human life and health (principle six) is immeasurably strengthened (1) when we view others as unique, valuable individuals made in the image and likeness of God, (2) when we see them as capable of growth and change, (3) when we learn their name and initiate a conversation, (4) when we spend time with them and perhaps work on their behalf, and (5) when we see them not as isolated individuals but as part of households and families.

There is no "proof," in the Modern (Enlightenment) sense, that these are THE ten principles of highly ethical people. It is not very persuasive or satisfying to offer a group of ethical principles and simply declare "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Of course, we value proof and evidence as well as whatever God says. But what Israel and the Church have declared for millennia as a message from God turns out to fit rather precisely our human condition. It may be in radical conflict with our culture but it is not in conflict with our nature, the reality of our lives and relationships.

Theories (including ethical theories) relate to reality like shoes relate to feet. We can spend time arguing or mulling over how shoes look, what they are made of, who made them, and so on. These are not unimportant matters. But the critical test of a shoe is how it fits when you walk in it. Is it durable? Flexible? It needs to look decent so you don't feel ridiculous. But it is ultimately much more important whether you can walk through the rain without getting too wet, over rough terrain without pain, up and down hills with adequate traction, and so on.

This is my argument for these Ten Principles of Highly Ethical People. I do think they are in a profound sense the Word of God. But I also think they prove themselves true because people can live with them in all times, places, and circumstances. They make life and relationships better, at least over the long haul if not always in the short term. Violating the principles may give a short term advantage but I believe doing so not only harms others but dehumanizes our self. It is subhuman for you or I to treat others as valueless, faceless, replaceable parts. It is subhuman for us to hurt others, undermine their relationships, lie about them or take their stuff.

So in the end, these are not just ten principles for "highly ethical people" as though just for a group of saints and ethical heroes among us. They are really the ten basic principles for being a human being.