

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
ONE

ETHICS IN SCRIPTURE



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson One

Ethics in Scripture

INTRODUCTION

I think every Christian would agree that ethics is in crisis in our day, not only in the world out there among unbelievers, but also in the church. Unbelievers go in a million directions trying to figure out the difference between right and wrong. Even well-meaning Christians are all over the map when it comes to ethical and moral living. I've met some Christians who seem to have very few moral convictions at all, and I've met other Christians who seem to have simple answers to every ethical question.

I guess the older I get, the more I'm convinced that one of our greatest needs today is a way to understand how Scriptures apply to our lives, how we should think, act and feel — a way to make biblical decisions.

This series on *Making Biblical Decisions* is the first in our course on Christian Ethics. In this series, we will focus on the process the Bible teaches us to follow as we make decisions about all sorts of things in our lives. We have called this first lesson "Ethics in Scripture." And we will introduce this series first by establishing a biblical definition of Christian ethics, then by examining the biblical threefold criteria of good works, and finally by suggesting the basic contours of a biblical threefold process for making ethical decisions. Let's begin by defining the concept of Christian ethics.

DEFINITION

Nearly all peoples in all places have ethical systems. Different religions, cultures, societies, and individuals vary in the ways they determine what is ethical, and they often come to radically different conclusions regarding which behaviors and ideas should be endorsed and which should be censured. The field of study that investigates these different systems and their conclusions is generally called ethics.

In general terms, ethics is the study of moral right and wrong, the study of what is good and what is evil. This definition will suffice as a basic orientation toward ethics, but in these lessons we are not as interested in the broad study of ethics as we are in the particularly Christian or biblical view of ethics. So, we will work with a definition that is a bit narrower than the study of moral right and wrong. We will define Christian ethics as:

Theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not.

In order to understand the significance of our outlook on Christian ethics, we will look at three aspects of this definition: First, we will notice how it draws attention to God

and his blessings. Second, we will see the breadth of issues that are included in Christian ethics. And third, we will take note of how Christian ethics goes beyond mere actions. Consider first how our definition focuses on ethics as a matter of God and his blessings.

GOD AND BLESSINGS

Unlike many other ethical systems, our definition focuses on God and his blessing rather than on terms like good or evil, or right or wrong. Those things that receive God's blessing are good and right, whereas those things that do not receive his blessing are wrong and evil. But what are some of the implications of focusing on God and his blessing in this way?

By focusing on God and his blessing in this way, we mean to say two things: First, God's nature is the standard of morality. And second, God's actions demonstrate the standard of morality. Let's look at these two ideas in a bit more detail.

Divine Nature

First, we affirm that God himself is the ultimate standard of right and wrong, of good and evil. In saying this we deny that ultimate morality is a standard outside of God, to which even he must comply if he is to be considered good. Instead, we insist that God is not accountable to any standard outside himself and that everything that accords with his character is good and right, while everything that does not is evil and wrong.

Consider these ideas in light of John's teaching in 1 John 1:5-7:

God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true. If we walk in the light, as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

This metaphor of God as light is primarily a moral evaluation. Darkness is equated with sin and lies, and light with truth and purity from sin. It is a picture of God as perfectly free from sin in his very nature. And it is a description of sin as that which is foreign to the nature of God.

In light of this passage and others like it, we are obligated to see God's nature as the standard and model of goodness and rightness. And for the same reasons, we are compelled to condemn as sinful, evil and wrong those things that oppose his nature.

Divine Actions

The second thing we mean to say by focusing on God and his blessing is that God's actions demonstrate the standard of morality. One of the chief ways

God shows his approval for what is right and good is by bestowing blessings. Similarly, he shows his hatred for what is wrong and evil by withholding blessings and pouring out curses. We see this principle in action innumerable times through the Bible.

For example, in explaining the terms of his covenant to Israel in Leviticus 26:3, God offered to bestow tremendous blessings on them upon the condition that they “walk in [his] statutes and keep [his] commandments.” But beginning in verse 14 of the same chapter, he threatened horrible curses on them if they did not obey his every word. Listen to the way he introduced these curses in Leviticus 26:14-16:

If you do not listen to me and do not do all of these commandments, if you despise my statutes, and if your soul hates my judgments so as not to do all my commandments, and to break my covenant, I will do this to you: I will appoint terror over you, consumption and fever destroying your eyes and causing your soul to pass away (Leviticus 26:14-16).

The curses in this chapter run on for many, many verses, each more terrible than the last. But the point is that God threatens these curses against those who refuse to obey his commandments and despise his covenant relationship. Nowhere in this passage does God proclaim that to disobey him is evil or bad or wrong. Nevertheless, this is the only conclusion we can draw based on the awful judgments he threatens against those who turn against him.

As we search Scripture for the ways God has revealed the standards of good and evil, we find that many times the Bible communicates right and wrong by recording God’s reactions rather than by explicitly labeling things good or evil. When we pay attention to God’s blessings and curses, we find that the ethical aspect of many texts becomes clearer.

In addition to focusing on God and his blessings, our definition of Christian ethics highlights the breadth of the subject of ethics. As we use the term “ethics,” it is not just a branch of theology; it is an essential aspect of all theology and all Christian living.

BREADTH OF ISSUES

In the past, ethics was seen as a subsection of theology that dealt with practical moral issues. Christian ethics was normally taught as if it were just one of many theological disciplines. In this older model, much of theology could be done with little to no concern for ethics. As a result, teachers of ethics frequently dealt only with very small portions of theology and life.

By contrast, our definition stresses that Christian ethics touches every dimension of the Christian life. Ethics is: Theology viewed as a means of determining what is good and evil.

In one way or another, every theological discipline and subject deals with God’s blessings on good and curses against evil. Every discipline of theology obligates us to

believe certain facts, to do certain things, and to feel certain emotions. And because it is right to believe, do and feel these things, and wrong not to, all theology involves the study of right and wrong. All theology involves ethics.

Now beyond this, Christian ethics touches on every area of life. Theology itself is not restricted to a small area of life. In the third chapter of my book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, I define “theology” as “the application of the Word of God to all of life.” In other words, theology is not just reflection on God and his Word. Rather, it is reflection that carries through to application. Nothing stands outside God’s moral standards.

Consider this approach to ethics and theology in light of 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be fully qualified, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training summarize the ways that we apply Scripture to our lives. We might paraphrase this verse as saying: All Scripture is useful for theology, which prepares the man of God to do what is morally right in every part of his life. Simply put, Christian ethics touches on every area of life.

DEPTH OF ISSUES

In addition to focusing on the breadth of the subject of ethics, our definition addresses not only behavior, as is common in many ethical systems, but also the attitudes and natures of individual persons. Our definition of Christian ethics highlights which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessings and which do not. God’s moral standards hold us accountable in our actions, in the thoughts and inclinations of our heart, and in our very natures.

Now, we can say with certainty that the Bible emphasizes good behavior. And it is generally obvious to most people that actions can properly be considered right or wrong, so that we will not spend much time explaining the reason for including behavior in this definition. But we must also remember that Scripture views attitudes as morally right or wrong. Many well-meaning believers think that our attitudes and emotions are amoral, that is, that they are neither good nor evil. But Scripture demonstrates time and again that our feelings may be confirmed as morally right or denounced as morally wrong.

Because the bible teaches Christians to conform every aspect of their lives and being to God’s moral standards, Christian ethics must address not only behavior, but also emotions, orientations, predilections, inclinations, preferences, thoughts, imaginations, beliefs, and our very natures. For example, in Matthew 5:22 Jesus taught that:

Everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to the judgment (Matthew 5:22).

And in Matthew 5:28 he added that:

Everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28).

In both these examples Jesus condemned as sinful the emotions and attitudes of the heart, whether or not they eventually motivated the person to action. In fact, he taught that these attitudes actually violate the same commandments that forbid the sinful actions.

And consider his description of the human heart in Mark 7:21-23:

For from within, from the heart of men, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, evil intentions, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from inside (Mark 7:21-23).

Not only are evil attitudes morally wrong in and of themselves, but they are also the root of evil actions.

Following Scripture, we will also speak of morally good and evil persons. An evil behavior flows from an evil heart; an evil heart flows from an evil nature. For this reason, if we are to please God, it is not enough that our actions and attitudes be morally good. We must also be intrinsically good persons; we must have good natures.

Scripture addresses this aspect of our being in Romans 8:5-9 where Paul wrote:

Those who exist in accordance with flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh; but those who exist in accordance with the Spirit on the things of the Spirit... The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. It is not submitted to God's law, indeed it cannot be... But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you (Romans 8:5-9).

In short, all unbelievers “exist in accordance with the flesh.” Their natures are evil, and therefore their actions and attitudes are also evil. Paul identified the fallen nature as being the source of a mind that is hostile to God and that does not and cannot submit to God’s law.

In distinction from unbelievers, believers are indwelled by the Holy Spirit. And when he wrote of those who live in accordance with the Spirit, he referred to the new natures believers have because the Holy Spirit indwells them. This means that believers have an antidote for the fallen nature and possess the ability to conform to God’s standard of ethics.

So, when we speak of Christian ethics as “Theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not,” we mean at least three things: First, God himself is the standard of ethics; he alone is the rule by which all right and wrong are measured. Second, all theology, even all of life, has ethical dimensions. Third, God’s moral standards hold us accountable in our actions, in the thoughts and inclinations of our heart, and in our very natures.

Now that we have defined what we mean when we speak of Christian ethics, we should turn our attention to the biblical threefold criteria for that which is ethically good.

THREEFOLD CRITERIA

One very helpful way of examining the Bible's teaching on this complex issue is to look at the way the *Westminster Confession of Faith* defines the good works of unbelievers. Listen to chapter 16, paragraph 7 where the *Westminster Confession of Faith* makes some important distinctions concerning the good works performed by unbelievers:

Works done by unregenerate men ... may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God.

From the outset we see here that the *Westminster Confession* rightly admits that there is a sense in which unbelievers do things that God commands. More than this, it also acknowledges that unbelievers' actions can produce good and beneficial results for themselves and for others. In other words, in one sense, unbelievers can do things that resemble our definition of ethical living: actions that bring about the blessing of God. On this matter Scripture agrees. For example, in Matthew 7:9-11 the Lord spoke these words:

Is there some man among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? Therefore, if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

It is very common for people in general to do some things that are externally good, such as loving and providing for their children. In fact, it would be extremely difficult to point to a person who never once did anything that outwardly resembled the works that God approves, or who never once held an attitude akin to those that inspire God's blessings. So, there is a superficial sense in which even unbelievers may do things that God commands and benefit from them.

Nevertheless, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, rightly, does not let the matter rest at this point. Instead, it points out that the apparently virtuous actions that unbelievers perform are not what they appear to be. Notice what the *Confession* says: These actions are sinful; they cannot please God or make someone worthy of grace from God.

Even though we can applaud unbelievers when they outwardly conform to God's commands, we have to remember that they are not truly virtuous. They are not good

enough to please God or to earn the blessing of salvation. But, why is this? How can actions that outwardly conform to God's commands still be sinful?

As we will see, obedience to God's commands must be done with the proper motive. Second, it must be done according to the proper standard, according to the manner prescribed in Scripture. And third, it must be done with the proper goal in mind, namely to glorify God. In short, unless a work is done with the right motive, in conformity to the right standard and for the right goal, it is not a work that God will reward with blessings.

In the first place, let's take a closer look at the proper motive.

PROPER MOTIVE

Unless a work is done with the right motive, it is not a work that God will reward with blessings. First, it must proceed from a heart that is purified by faith. Second, actions must flow out of Christian love.

Faith

In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, "Works [that]... proceed not from a heart purified by faith... [are] sinful, and cannot please God." This criterion of the right motive is closely associated with the way our definition of Christian ethics focuses on good persons with good natures. As we have already said, only believers who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can do works that God rewards with blessings.

One reason for this is that only believers have hearts that are purified by faith. Here the *Confession* is speaking of God-given, saving faith that remains and grows within believers. It is the means of purification through which believers receive new and good natures. And it properly motivates believers to do good works. As James wrote in 2:14-20:

What profit is there ... if someone says he has faith but he does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... If faith has no works, it is dead... Are you willing to recognize ... that faith without works is useless? (James 2:14-20).

The kind of faith that purifies the heart, the kind of faith that saves, is the kind of faith that motivates good works. This is the faith possessed by believers and only by believers.

Listen to the way the author of Hebrews makes this point in Hebrews 11:6:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to God must believe that he exists, and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

Unless our attempts to seek God's blessings are founded on faith, we cannot please God and therefore cannot be rewarded by him. In other words, without faith as one of our motives, we cannot do good works.

Paul's statement of this doctrine is perhaps the clearest and most succinct in all of Scripture. In Romans 14:23 he wrote:

Everything that is not from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

Actions must flow out of saving faith if God is to be pleased with them as good works.

In addition to the necessity of saving faith, the Scripture also stresses the theme of proper motive when it focuses so much on Christian love.

Love

Consider that in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul taught that our works are useless if they are not motivated by love. In verses 1-3 he wrote:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophecy, and if I know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give up my body to be burned, but I do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Works and even spiritual gifts that produce beneficial results merit no reward if they are not motivated by love. And as we have already seen, things that do not merit reward are not good in God's eyes.

We see this concern also in the way that Jesus summarized God's revelation in Scripture in Matthew 22:37-40:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and most important commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

To reject God's law is to reject him as he offers himself to us in covenant relationship. And to disobey his law is to sin. Here Jesus teaches us that the Law itself, and the rest of the Old Testament as well, require above all else that we love the Lord and our neighbors.

Love is an aspect of every law God requires us to obey, so that if we do not act in love, no work we do can conform to his standard. And what makes God's standard even harder to meet is that our love must be for both God and neighbor. Unbelievers do not love God; they are hostile to him. And as a result, they can never be motivated by love for God. In other words, they can never have the right motive. And because of this, they can never do anything that God considers, in an ultimate sense, to be good.

PROPER STANDARD

Besides pointing out that good works must flow from the right motives, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* also states that good works must conform to the right standard. Listen to the words of chapter 16, paragraph 7 again:

Works done by unregenerate men ... may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they ... are [not] done in a right manner, according to the Word ... they are therefore sinful.

Here the *Confession* emphasizes that in order for works to be good, they must be done according to the standard of the Word of God, that is, God's revelation.

To introduce our approach to the right standard, we will touch on three matters: first, commands of Scripture; second, all of Scripture; and third, general revelation, creation itself.

Commands

In the first place all the commands of Scripture are designed to guide us. Listen to how John summarized this idea in 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who commits sin commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

Notice what John did not say. He did not simply teach that everyone who commits lawlessness commits sin, as if lawlessness were just one of many kinds of sin. Instead, he said that everyone who sins is guilty of lawlessness, meaning that all sin entails lawlessness. All sin violates God's Law.

John's words here are categorical and put the importance of the proper standard in the strongest terms possible. But today we must realize that even many Christians think it is possible that some violations of God's law are not sinful. Certain commands of God may be ignored. Well, the apostle James addressed this issue in 2:9-10 of his letter:

If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as disobedient. For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all the points (James 2:9-10).

Clearly some violations of the Law are sinful, such as showing favoritism, which James mentioned. But James then went on to say that to violate any particular stipulation of the Law was to violate every stipulation of the Law. Because the Law is a unified whole that reflects God's character and nature, to transgress any part of it is in some senses to transgress every part of it, and to sin against God himself. Therefore, if any violations of the Law are sinful, all violations of the Law are sinful.

Now, we will look into this matter more deeply in future lessons, but from the outset we must make a firm distinction here between the law of God and its application. From a biblical perspective, every law is still binding on followers of Christ. But the process of application is complex, so complex that obedience in one situation may look very different from obedience in another situation.

Now, we should emphasize that we are not advocating relativism. It is not true that the Bible means different things to different people and that all these meanings are equally valid. On the contrary, the Bible means what God says it means — what its original authors intended it to mean. God's Word is our binding norm, and we cannot vary from it. Therefore, we are justified in saying that all good works must conform to the standard of biblical law.

All Scripture

In the second place, the proper standard requires submission to the whole bible. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* does not just say that God's Law is a criterion of all good works, but that God's Word as a whole is a criterion of good works. That is to say, good works must be done according to the teaching of all revelation, especially Scripture, even according to those portions that are not formally part of the law. Consider for example that even the Law itself appeals to other portions of Scripture as the basis for its commands.

For instance, in the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath commandment appeals to the account of creation as the basis of its authority. In Exodus 20:9-11 we read:

You shall labor and do all your work for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, but on the seventh day he rested... For this reason the Lord blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Exodus 20:9-11).

At this point the Ten Commandments themselves establish their binding moral authority on the moral implications of the creation account.

Jesus did something similar when he defended the disciples' so-called Sabbath-breaking on the basis of David's behavior. Listen to the way he responded to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:3-4:

Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, along with those who were with him, how he entered the house of God ... and ate the consecrated bread, which only the priests are allowed to eat, and also gave some to those who were with him? (Matthew 12:3-4).

Jesus approved of David's actions and drew a moral application from them. And he did this even though the account of this event was not part of the legal code. So, we see that in the Bible not only is the Law treated as the standard for good works, but so are

the other portions. But this should not seem strange to us. After all, earlier in this lesson we read 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be fully qualified, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Paul did not limit the moral aspects of Scripture to those portions that contain commandments and legal codes. Rather, he insisted that all Scripture was useful for ethical training, that all Scripture places moral demands on us. Therefore, our actions must conform to the standards of all Scripture if they are to be morally good.

General Revelation

But we have also hinted that God's Word is even broader than Scripture. In a very important sense, God's revelation in the creation itself is part of his Word so that God's revelation given through creation, which is commonly called "general revelation," is also part of the standard for good works. One of the clearest places we find this idea in Scripture is Romans 1:20. There Paul wrote:

Since the world's creation, [God's] invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through the things that have been made, so that [men] are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Paul then went on to argue that despite what men know about God's moral standards through general revelation, they prefer to sin.

But the point is this: Men's actions are condemned because they violate the standards revealed by God's general revelation. Or to put it in the terms we have been using, general revelation is part of God's Word, and part of the criterion to which good works must conform. So, to recap what we have said, Scripture teaches that good works must conform to God's Word as it is revealed in the Law, in all of Scripture, and in creation.

PROPER GOAL

Besides needing to be properly motivated and to conform to the standard of God's Word, all good works must have the right end or goal. Now, good works may have any number of immediate goals. For instance, when parents earn money to pay for food, shelter, clothing, their immediate goal is to support themselves and their families. This is a good and admirable goal. But in our study of ethics, we are more interested in the ultimate goal of the works that people do.

If our works are to please God, immediate goals like caring for our families, obeying our parents, keeping the Sabbath and the like, must be part of a bigger picture. We must do these things because at our core we want to glorify God by living in a way that pleases him.

Scripture teaches us in many different ways that God's glory is to be a central, foundational goal in our lives. It does this both by specific examples and in general principles. One such example appears in Paul's instructions about eating meat sold in the marketplace. Paul allowed that both eating and abstaining could be good things to do as long as God's glory was respected. He wrote these words in 1 Corinthians 10:31:

Whether you eat or drink or do anything else, do everything for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Paul understood that some immediate goals might make it good to eat, while different immediate goals might make it good to abstain from eating. His point was that there ought to be another principle overriding these immediate goals, namely, a concern for God's glory, and that unless this ultimate goal were in sight, neither eating nor abstaining could be considered good.

Peter made a similar point when he instructed his readers concerning the use of spiritual gifts. Listen to his words in 1 Peter 4:11:

If someone speaks, it is to be as the Word of God; if someone ministers, it is to be from the strength that God supplies; in order that in all things God may be glorified (1 Peter 4:11).

Peter's immediate point was that all gifts and ministries in the church must be done for the ultimate goal of God's glory. But the overriding principle Peter was applying was that everything in the Christian life should be done in a way that honors God and brings him glory.

Other statements in Scripture make this general principle more explicit. One place we see it stated rather plainly is Romans 11:36 where Paul wrote these words about God:

All things are from him and through him and to him. Glory to him forever! (Romans 11:36).

Here Paul expressed great joy at the fact that everything is "to him," meaning, among other things, that everything is to be done for God's sake, having his glory and honor as its ultimate goal. Paul then emphasized this point by exclaiming, "Glory to him forever!"

In fact, this verse suggests that God is ultimately glorified in everything that exists whether by creating it, sustaining it, governing it, empowering it, or receiving it as service in his honor. It should be no surprise, then, that he approves of works intended to bring him glory and that he condemns works that disregard or oppose his glory. God rewards and approves only those works that have his glory as their ultimate goal.

Now that we have established a biblical definition of Christian ethics and examined the threefold scriptural criteria for good works, we should apply these ideas by laying out the threefold process by which Christians should make ethical decisions.

THREEFOLD PROCESS

Throughout these lessons we will examine the practical steps that we should take when making ethical decisions time and again. At this point, however, we are in a position to sketch the basic contours of the approach that we will explain more fully in later lessons.

To introduce our approach we will touch on three matters: first, three tendencies of different Christian groups; second, three perspectives on ethical decision making; and third, the interdependence of these perspectives. Consider first the tendencies that different Christian groups have as they make ethical decisions.

TENDENCIES

There are many different ways that believers try to make ethical choices in life, but they tend to fall into three main categories. Some emphasize our Christian conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit, insisting that actions are good if they accord with these internal indicators. Others emphasize Scripture, insisting that actions are good if they obey the dictates of Scripture, but bad if they do not. Still others emphasize the outcome of actions, insisting that actions are good if they produce good consequences, but bad if they produce bad consequences.

As we have seen, the Bible defines good works as those that are done with the right motive, by the right standard, and for the right goal. And in fact, these three criteria for good works correspond to the emphases we have just mentioned.

Those who emphasize conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit are primarily concerned with the right motive. We might say that they look first at the fact that good works can only be done by good persons. When it comes to ethical judgments, they tend to ask questions like: What is my attitude? Do I have the maturity to make the right decision? Do I have the spiritual capacity to apply God's Word to the situation?

Then there are those who make ethical decisions by focusing on the right standard. These people emphasize the dictates of Scripture. When faced with an ethical issue, their first question tends to be: What does God's Word say?

Finally, those who think mainly of the consequences of their actions are chiefly interested in the right goal. They focus on the situation itself, asking questions like: What is the problem? What issues are involved? What outcomes will result from the possible solutions to this problem?

With these three general directions that Christians take in making their decisions, it will help to realize that these directions actually represent three essential perspectives for all ethical decision making.

PERSPECTIVES

Throughout these lessons we will speak of ethical judgments or decisions in this way:

Ethical judgment involves the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person.

This definition ties together many things we have already stated: We mention “God’s Word” because divine revelation is the standard or norm by which we must measure all judgments. The term “situation” reminds us of the problem, the goal, and the consequences of the solutions we are to consider. And we mention “a person” to stress the importance of a person’s nature, motive and conscience in determining right courses of action. So, in effect we are suggesting that moral decisions can be made properly only when all three directions are taken on any given issue.

It often seems counterintuitive to many believers that we place relatively equal emphasis on all three of these factors. After all, in most conservative Christian circles, we cherish the Scriptures as our only infallible rule of faith and practice. In this sense, we value the teaching of Scripture above every other consideration we may make. Yet, it helps to see that if we are biblical in our approach to ethics, if we follow the Scriptures as our only infallible rule, then we will see that the Bible itself teaches us to consider not only God’s Word but the situation and the person as well when we view the whole process of ethical inquiry.

Ethics must be approached in at least three different ways or from three different perspectives. Ethics should be done from the perspective of God’s Word, from the perspective of the situation, and from the perspective of the person. And biblically, the insights of all of these perspectives are valuable. Therefore, the best approach is to do ethics from all three perspectives and to let the insights from each perspective inform and influence the insights from the others.

We will speak of three perspectives or approaches toward every ethical judgment: the situational perspective, the normative perspective and the existential perspective. We will return to these perspectives many times in these lessons, but at this point we should look at the basic idea of each outlook.

Situational

When our ethical inquiries turn to the problems themselves, or to the consequences of actions, or to goals, we are doing ethics from the situational perspective. This approach may be called “teleological” because it focuses on the end or the result of actions. Approaching ethics from the situational perspective involves noting the relations of means to ends in God’s economy, asking questions like, what are the best means of achieving God’s purposes? It also includes appeals to moral behavior based on the prior example of God, Jesus, and other morally good characters in Scripture.

Scripture itself frequently adopts this perspective and encourages us to do the same when it instructs us on ethical topics by appealing to God’s sovereign, providential

control of his creation. This is particularly evident when it does so by referring to the events of redemption or by pointing to God, Jesus and others as models for our behavior. For example, in Romans 6:2-4, Paul argued that our death to sin and our burial with Christ took place in order that a specific end might be accomplished, namely, that we might live morally apart from sin:

We died to sin; how will we still live in it? ... We have been buried together with [Christ] ... in order that as Christ was raised from the dead ... so we also might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:2-4).

In so doing, he did not focus on the commandments of God or on the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and consciences but on the facts of the situation, including the events of redemption and the ends for which we were saved.

Paul also closed Romans chapter 6 with a situational perspective on ethics. He wrote these words in Romans 6:20-22:

When you were slaves of sin ... what benefit did you have then from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the result of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your benefit, leading to holiness, and the result is eternal life (Romans 6:20-22).

Paul encouraged his readers to live holy, moral lives and to abstain from the sins they once committed. Paul argued that by living holy lives, they would obtain eternal life. Here, he also argued on the basis of consequences, but this time he focused on the reward that would be given in response to godly living.

Peter also presented situational arguments for moral behavior. Listen to the way he argued in 1 Peter 2:21:

Christ suffered for you, leaving an example for you, in order that you might follow in his footsteps (1 Peter 2:21).

Here Peter encouraged believers to be willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness, and he did so not by quoting Scripture or speaking of the inward leading of the Holy Spirit, but by appealing to the facts of redemptive history and specifically to the example of Jesus' suffering on the cross.

Normative

Perhaps the most intuitive perspective for Christians is what we call the normative perspective. Normative refers to the fact that God's Word is the norm, or standard, for ethics. We are doing ethics from the normative perspective when we look to the Bible to tell us what to do.

For example, in restoring proper worship to Israel, King Josiah instructed his people to keep the Passover. In 2 Kings 23:21 he commanded them:

Observe the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant (2 Kings 23:21).

His argument was not that redemptive history, or the facts of their situation bound them to this obligation, or that God inwardly directed them to keep the Passover, but that Scripture itself directed them to celebrate this memorial. His appeal was to the words of the Law that God had delivered to his people through Moses.

The apostle John also adopted the normative perspective when he appealed to God's commandment as the basis for belief and behavior in 1 John 3:23:

This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another (1 John 3:23).

Again, God's Word was the basis for behavior. God commanded that people behave and believe in a certain way, and his authority alone obligated all people to conform to this moral standard.

Having now looked at the situational and normative perspectives, let's take a look at ethics viewed from the perspective of the person, which we will call the existential perspective.

Existential

When we approach ethics by asking questions that are specific to the people involved, we are doing ethics from an existential perspective. By "existential" we don't mean to associate this perspective with the particular philosophy of the existentialists. Rather, we mean that this perspective views ethics through the lens of the individual person's experience. The existential perspective focuses on the self in confrontation and interaction with God. When we approach ethics from this perspective, we do not degrade God's authority or exalt our own sensibilities as our ultimate standard of right and wrong. Rather, we ask questions like, how must I change if I am to be holy? And we pay attention to influences like the inward leading of the Holy Spirit and sanctified personal conscience.

So we see, then, that Scripture affirms our consciences and the leading of the Holy Spirit as valid means to determine what is right and wrong. Along with the situational and the normative perspectives, the existential perspective is a necessary tool for us as we seek to make ethical judgments.

Scripture contains many examples of this approach to ethics, such as in 1 John 3:21 where the apostle wrote:

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have assurance before God (1 John 3:21).

His point was that as redeemed people our hearts are in tune with God's character, and if God's love abides within us, we will be able to intuit what is right and what is wrong. God moves within his people to bring them inward conviction of right and wrong. And

when we acknowledge this aspect in doing ethics, we are using the existential perspective.

We find the same kind of thinking in Paul's writings. For instance, in Galatians 5 Paul associated the flesh with our sinful nature and listed many immoral deeds that the flesh motivates us to commit. He also explained that the Holy Spirit works in us to produce morally good things, such as love, joy and peace. In this context, he explained that believers can perform good deeds by obeying the inward leading of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to his teaching in Galatians 5:16:

**Walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desire of the flesh
(Galatians 5:16).**

One legitimate way for believers to make ethical judgments is to heed the Spirit's inner prompting. And when we do this, we are viewing right and wrong from the existential perspective.

In Romans 14:5, 14, 23 Paul placed so much emphasis on the existential perspective that he insisted that to violate our consciences was sin, even though our consciences are not perfect.

**Each person must be fully assured in his own mind... I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. But to the one who thinks it to be unclean, to him it is unclean... The one who doubts is condemned if he eats, because it is not from faith
(Romans 14:5, 14, 23).**

Paul was talking about food sacrificed to idols and explaining that it was good for Christians to eat this food so long as in their minds they did not think of it as an act of pagan worship. But if their consciences would not allow them to eat in this manner, it would be sin for them to eat this food.

Interestingly, in the context of this chapter, Paul argued that if the matter were viewed from simply the normative and situational perspectives, most believers would be inclined to eat this food. But he insisted that believers also consider the insights of the existential perspective and that they not eat unless they could reach the same conclusions from all three perspectives.

Now that we have introduced the situational, normative, and existential perspectives in ethics, we should spend some time looking at the way these three perspectives interact with and depend on one another. The three different perspectives from which we may approach ethics are not separate constituent parts; rather, each perspective is the whole of ethics, viewed from one angle or another.

I have to admit that at first, this can be a little confusing. After all, it would appear that some of the examples we have already given in this lesson only employ one perspective at a time. But in reality, all of our examples involve all three perspectives. We have simply chosen examples where one perspective is displayed most prominently in order to highlight the differences among the three. The truth of the matter is that no perspective should ever function in isolation from the others.

INTERDEPENDENCE

In the first place, consider what is involved in the situational perspective. The situation entails all the relevant facts of the ethical questions we are considering, including the persons involved in the matter and God's Word, which is the standard by which the matter is to be evaluated. If it were not for persons, there would be no one to do ethical inquiry, and if it were not for God's revelation, nothing would be known about the facts in the first place. In other words, even when we evaluate ethical questions from the situational perspective, our investigations must always include personal and normative considerations. It is safe to say that unless we see the situation in light of God's Word, and unless we recognize how the situation bears on us as persons, we have not rightly understood the situation.

The same is true when we speak of the normative perspective. If we cannot apply the words of Scripture to our situations and selves, we really have not understood Scripture. Consider the man who says, "I know what 'You shall not steal' means, but I don't know how that applies to me or to my embezzling funds from my employer." This person certainly does not have an adequate concept of the words "You shall not steal." He claims to understand the normative requirements, but his failure to be able to comprehend a situational context to which these apply demonstrate that, in reality, he has little clue what the Bible requires.

And, of course, the same can be said about the existential perspective. We cannot rightly understand the self unless we see it in the context of its situation and rightly interpret it by the Word of God. Our consciences must be informed by Scripture if we are to intuit rightly. And we must also know the facts of a situation before our conscience can rightly point out our responsibilities.

So then, each perspective necessitates consideration of the others. If we perfectly apply any perspective, it will show us all the same insights that we can gain from the other two. The problem is that we are not perfect human beings with perfect insight. For this reason, we usually don't see existential and situational issues very clearly when we approach matters from an exclusively normative viewpoint. And we typically don't understand normative and existential issues well if we only adopt the situational perspective. And of course, it is also true that if we only look at existential aspects of ethical questions, we rarely come to right conclusions regarding normative and situational issues.

If we were able to think about ethics perfectly, all three perspectives would always render exactly the same conclusions and insights. But since we are not perfect, we must take advantage of all three perspectives so that we have all the information possible about ethical problems. By using all three perspectives, we can provide ourselves with checks and balances to the insights of any single perspective.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have introduced the subject of Christian ethics by defining it as the whole of theology viewed from its ethical aspects. We have also explained the Bible's threefold criteria for good works. Finally, we have suggested a biblical model for making ethical decisions that takes into account the benefits of emphasizing and balancing the normative, situational, and existential perspectives.

Making biblical decisions in the modern world can be extremely challenging. We constantly feel ourselves pulled by a variety of influences, many of which do not recognize God's authority and do not care for His goodness. But as Christians we must affirm God's goodness, and we must pursue it in our ethical decisions. And one very helpful way to do this is through the use of the normative, situational and existential perspectives on ethics. As we incorporate these perspectives into our thinking, we prepare ourselves to evaluate complex ethical problems and to make wise, biblical decisions.

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