

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
TWO

THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE:
GOD AND HIS WORD



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Lesson Two

The Normative Perspective: God and His Word

INTRODUCTION

Children can be very amusing, especially when they try to learn and apply new ideas. The other day my friend's four-year-old daughter came up to him just before dinner with a piece of candy in her hand and said, "Daddy, let me eat this candy." Now, she was not normally allowed to have candy before a meal, so her father asked her, "Why should I let you have that candy just before dinner?" And she responded with great bravado, "Because I said so."

Now, it's obvious that this little girl had learned her response from her parents. So, she naturally expected her father to obey as soon as he heard those magic words, "Because I said so." But this little girl did not understand a fundamental fact about human communication. The authority of commands and directives depend on the authority of the person saying them. Although the little girl used the same words as her parents, she had to obey because *her parents* were speaking, but her parents did not have to obey because *she* was speaking.

As we explore Christian ethics, we must come to grips with this fundamental fact: the authority of moral principles is derived from the person who has said them. Why are we to submit ourselves to the instruction of Scripture? Why do the moral guidelines of the Christian faith have authority over us? The answer is straightforward — these directives have authority because they come from God who has all authority. We obey them "because he said so."

This is the second lesson in our series on *Making Biblical Decisions*. In this series of lessons, we are focusing on the process the Bible teaches us to follow as we make ethical decisions. We have entitled this lesson "The Normative Perspective: God and His Word." And in this lesson we will begin to explore the question of authority in ethics, or to be more precise, the authority of God and his Word in ethics.

In the preceding lesson we saw that making ethical decisions as Christians requires that we consider three basic matters: the proper standard, the proper goal, the proper motive. We also designated these considerations the normative, situational, and existential perspectives in Christian ethics. To make moral decisions that please God and lead to his blessings, we must look at matters from a normative perspective by focusing on relevant standards or norms. We must also look at matters from a situational perspective, making sure that we have assessed the relevant facts and outcomes of a situation responsibly. And we must look at matters from an existential perspective, making sure that we have proper purposes and motives. In this lesson, we will take our first look at the normative perspective, the proper standards for ethical decisions, by concentrating on the standards of God and his word.

This lesson will divide into two main parts: We will look first at God himself as our absolute standard. And second, we will explore how God's Word serves as our

revealed ethical norm, or standard. Let's turn our attention first to God himself as our ethical norm.

GOD AS STANDARD

You will recall that in our first lesson of this series, we saw that God himself is our absolute ethical norm. Those things that accord with God's character are "good" and "right," whereas those things that do not are "evil" and "wrong." God is the absolute ethical norm because he is not accountable to any standard outside or above himself. He has absolute moral authority. No one but God has the ultimate right to determine what is good and what is evil, or to render binding, eternal judgments based on his determinations.

In order to understand these ideas and their implications more fully, we will take a closer look at three important aspects of God as our moral standard: We will look first at God's own character as the absolute moral law or standard. And second, we will see that God is the absolute moral judge who will render binding judgments on every individual. And third, we will explore some of the implications of these truths for our own ethical decisions. Let's look first at God's own character as the absolute moral standard.

GOD IN HIMSELF

There are many issues that could be addressed as we think of God himself as the absolute moral law. But for our purposes, we will touch on two matters: First, we will speak of goodness as a personal attribute of God. And second, we will look at the fact that God's goodness is the ultimate standard for all goodness.

Personal Attribute

In the first place, when we speak of goodness as a personal attribute of God, we mean that he himself is the standard by which all morality is measured. Although we sometimes speak abstractly about concepts of goodness and rightness, and although we can apply terms like good and right to impersonal objects and ideas, these concepts are rightly derived from something much more basic: the goodness of God's person. Apart from God's character, there can be no such thing as goodness or rightness. Ethical value exists only as a reflection of God. In a very real sense, he is not just good and right; he is goodness and rightness themselves.

As we saw in our first lesson, one way that Scripture illustrates this idea that God's attributes are the absolute moral standard is through the metaphor of light. In 1 John 1:5-7, the apostle John taught:

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, literal).

The metaphor of God as light is primarily a moral evaluation. Darkness is equated with sin and lies, and light is associated with truth and purity from sin. Essentially, this passage explains that God is perfectly free from sin by defining sin as that which is foreign to God's nature. In other words, it assumes that God himself is the ultimate standard of goodness and rightness, so that anything contrary to God's nature is sin.

Jesus expressed the same idea when he stated in Mark 10:18:

No one is good except God alone (Mark 10:18).

By saying that only God met the standard of goodness, Jesus indicated that he was speaking of perfect and total goodness rather than of relative or derivative goodness. After all, the Bible does call other people good. But God's goodness is different. Unlike all other goodness, it is perfect in quality, absolute in degree, and unique to the persons of the Trinity.

We find similar statements of God's supreme goodness throughout Scripture, such as in Psalm 5:4 where David declared:

Evil does not dwell with [God] (Psalm 5:4).

And in Daniel 4:37 where even the Gentile King Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed:

All his works are true and his ways just (Daniel 4:37).

Perhaps the most succinct text embodying this idea is Matthew 5:48 where Jesus stated:

Be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

In all these passages, we see God presented as the absolute moral law in two ways: 1) the Lord is set forth as the apex of perfection as a being who is totally without flaw; and 2) we, as the readers of Scripture, are encouraged to measure our own goodness against God's actions and character.

On the basis of these and other biblical passages, we can rightly assert that goodness and rightness should be thought of first and foremost as eternal attributes of the persons of the trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Goodness then, consists of the attitudes, values, motives, desires, and goals that the living God has within his own heart. So, in order to discover the right standard of goodness, we must not strive simply to learn abstract and ethical principles. Rather, we must strive to know the heart of God himself.

Ultimate Standard

In the second place, when we speak of God as the absolute moral Law, we also mean that there is no higher standard than God's person. God's goodness is the ultimate standard for all goodness.

Unfortunately, many people have the misconception that there is a definition of "good" against which God himself must be measured if he is to be called "good" and "right." For example, some people think that God cannot be good if he judges human beings. Others believe that a good God would never allow evil. And on the basis of these assumptions, they mistakenly conclude that the God of the Bible cannot rightly be described as "good."

Unfortunately, even though Christians reject this conclusion that God is not good, some believers wrongly accept the notion that there is a higher standard of goodness to which even God must conform himself.

Now, we should admit that at times the biblical writers themselves appear to have evaluated God by standards other than his own character. Most commonly, they measured God against the Bible. For example, in Psalm 119:65, 68 the psalmist wrote:

Do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord... You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees (Psalm 119:65, 68).

In verse 65, the psalmist acknowledged that God's word was a standard for goodness and even indicated that God's own actions could be judged "good" by this standard. And in verse 68 he proclaimed that God was indeed good and that God's actions were good, implying that this was because God had acted according to his word. Finally, the psalmist closed verse 68 by expressing his desire to learn God's decrees, that is, God's law, in order that he might be conformed to God's goodness. In short, in these verses the psalmist measured God's actions by the standard of God's law and found God's actions to be good.

But the writers of Scripture also knew that the law is not external to God; rather, it is his self-expression. Consider, for example, that later in Psalm 119:137 and 142 the psalmist wrote:

Righteous are you, O Lord, and your laws are right... Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true (Psalm 119:137, 142).

God's law is right and good because it comes from God, who himself is right and good. Because he is righteous, everything he does and everything he expresses — including his law — manifests his goodness. So, even when biblical authors compared God to the standard of the law, their intention was simply to reflect on how the law expresses God's character.

The authors of Scripture never intended to teach that God was subject to the Law in the way that human beings are. Nor did they believe that it was possible for God to contradict the standards revealed in the law. The Bible consistently speaks of God's own personal goodness as the absolute standard by which all ethical issues are to be evaluated.

GOD AS JUDGE

In addition to being the absolute moral standard, we will see that God is also the absolute judge of morality. That is, he has the ultimate prerogative to determine whether or not particular actions, emotions, and thoughts meet or transgress his moral requirements. And he has the ultimate right and power to act on his determinations.

Now, it is true that God delegates to human beings some responsibility for making ethical judgments. For instance, according to the Scriptures, legitimate human governments are given limited responsibility to honor good and punish evil. But the Bible also teaches that our human judgments are only correct and valid insofar as they mirror God's judgments. Jesus himself made it clear that on the last day, God himself will judge all people by their actions, and thereby he will either confirm or condemn all the judgments that human beings have ever made. At that time, he will curse those whose works are evil, and he will bless those whose works are good.

John 5:27-30 record Jesus' words on this matter:

[The Father] has given [the Son] authority to judge... all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned... my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me (John 5:27-30).

Regardless of the ethical conclusions we reach in this life, God himself is the highest court in the universe. He will make the ultimate determination of whether or not we have lived morally or immorally — and his judgments will be utterly binding. There is no basis on which anyone may challenge God's authority. All authority and all power belong to him, so that there is no way to avert his judgments. Listen to God's words to Job on this subject in Job 40:2-14:

Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? ... Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty... Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you (Job 40:2-14).

It is God's right to judge because he has absolute authority. And his judgments are inescapable because he has absolute power. Although God's creatures may wish to escape his authority and power, they cannot.

In the final analysis, there are only two options: either we submit ourselves to him as our judge seeking refuge in his mercy through Christ, or we defy him and suffer eternal punishment. And in case we are tempted to resent God and distrust his judgments, we should hasten to add that all of his determinations are just and right. He is not capricious, but always judges according to the immutable standard of his character. As Elihu argued in Job 34:10-12:

Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. He repays a man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves. It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice (Job 34:10-12).

As the absolute judge of morality, God consistently applies the absolute moral standard of his character in every judgment he makes. His judgments are perfect, exhibiting flawless insight and wisdom, unfailing fairness, and impeccable morality.

With this basic understanding of God as both the absolute moral norm and the absolute judge of morality in mind, let's now turn our attention to some of the implications of these matters for our lives.

IMPLICATIONS

When we spoke of God as the absolute moral standard, we referred primarily to God's existence in and of himself. And as we spoke of God as the absolute judge of morality, we focused mainly on his interactions with his creation. At this point, we will turn our attention to the fact that God's power and authority to judge obligate his creatures to live according to the standard of his character.

You will recall, for example, that in 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter instructed his readers in this way:

As he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

In this passage, Peter affirmed what we have already said, namely, that God's character is the ultimate standard for all human behavior. But he also applied this idea by insisting that because God is the standard for all human behavior, mankind is consequently obligated to obey and to imitate God.

Of course, it's important to realize that when we speak of imitating God, we're not talking about blurring the distinction between the creator and the creature. Rather, we are speaking of our responsibility to reflect his character. For example, when Peter wrote that we are to be holy because God is holy, he meant that God's character dictates what holiness is, and that because God acts according to his holiness, we are also to act according to his holiness.

We find a similar kind of thinking in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:44-48, Jesus said:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

Because God's behavior is also perfectly good and moral, it is also a binding moral standard. So, it is the obligation of every person to obey God by conforming to the standard of his actions.

Now, to most of us, this application probably seems obvious. After all, if God is the absolute authority who holds us accountable to an absolute standard, then it must follow that we are obligated to obey that standard. In reality, however, many people who are confronted with God's sovereign authority and righteous standard disregard God's commands and invent their own rules for their lives.

Some believe that even if God has the power to judge them, he does not have the right. They may even believe that it is honorable and good to resist God, despite the consequences, much like one might resist an evil human dictator.

We also see a form of this attitude in Christian circles. For instance, many in the church believe that because Jesus died for our sins, God no longer requires our obedience. They confuse forgiveness with license, wrongly imagining that because all our sins are forgiven, we may live as we please. In truth, however, even believers must live by the standard of God's character. Listen to the way John put it in 1 John 1:7:

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light ... the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

John made at least two points in this passage that are directly relevant to our discussion. First, by teaching that we must all "walk in the light, as he is in the light," John indicated that all believers are obligated to imitate God. Second, John said that our obligation to obey God's standard is related to our forgiveness in Christ. Only if we are imitating God does the blood of Christ cleanse us from sin. We cannot have Jesus as savior without also being obligated to obey him as Lord.

Having taken a closer look at the idea that God himself is the absolute ethical norm, we are now in a position to turn to our second main topic in this study of the normative perspective in ethics: the Word of God as our revealed ethical norm.

WORD AS STANDARD

We have looked at a number of ways in which the Bible demonstrates that God himself is our absolute ethical norm. But the fact of the matter is that we only know what God is like because he has revealed himself to us through his Word. Without this revelation, his character would be mysterious and unknown so that we would not be able to fulfill our obligation to follow his example. Fortunately, God's revelation teaches us many things about his character, enabling us to make informed ethical determinations that reflect this standard. So, while we insist that God himself is our ultimate norm, we must rely on his revelation or Word as our practical norm.

To explore how God's word is our revealed ethical norm, we will deal with three issues: First, we will touch on the three categories of revelation. Second, we will speak of the normative character of these three categories of revelation. And third, we will explore the unity of these three categories of revealed norms.

THREE CATEGORIES

In the first place, to move forward in our understanding of Christian ethics, we must come to grips with the fact that God has revealed himself in three ways.

Traditionally, theologians have spoken of God's revelation primarily in two categories: *special revelation* and *general revelation*. In the category of special revelation, they have placed direct communications from God such as Scripture, prophecy, dreams and visions. The category of general revelation has included such things as history, the universe, weather, plants, animals, and human beings. Simply put, general revelation has been a catchall category to hold everything that is not considered to be special revelation.

While this traditional approach is helpful in some ways, it tends to keep our attention away from some very important dimensions of God's revelation. So, in this lesson we will also speak of *existential revelation*, God's revelation in persons, revelation that is often grouped with general revelation but which really deserves to be treated separately.

With the three categories of revelation in mind, we are in a position to explore how all of God's revelation provides us with norms that reveal the character of God and guide us in making ethical decisions.

NORMATIVE CHARACTER

We will look first at the normative aspects of God's Word found in general revelation, second at the norms of special revelation, and third at existential revelation as a revealed standard. Let's turn our attention now to the way God's general revelation serves as an authority over us.

General Revelation

When we speak of general revelation, we are concerned with the way creation and history tell us true things about God and his moral requirements of us. Of course, general revelation cannot teach us everything. For example, some things, such as the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, are taught only through special revelation, and still other aspects of God's will come to us primarily through existential revelation. Also, the Bible emphasizes the fact that when Adam and Eve fell into sin, the created world fell with them, so that nature has been corrupted. As a result, creation and history are hard to interpret; they no longer present us with a perfectly clear picture of God's character. Nevertheless, the Bible assures us that general revelation still speaks clearly enough to teach us true things about God, it reveals the perfect standard of God's character and thus serves as one of God's revealed norms.

We will speak of two important features of general revelation as it applies to Christian ethics: its complexity, and its importance.

Complexity. In the first place, general revelation is complex. It is common for Christians to think about general revelation in very simple terms as if every form of general revelation were alike. In reality, however, there are varying degrees of generalness and specialness within the category of general revelation. Some aspects of general revelation are common to all people, whereas others are restricted to very limited groups of people. Some aspects are rather vague in meaning, whereas others are particularly clear. Some aspects follow the natural order with very little indication of God's active, daily involvement, whereas others clearly demonstrate God's supernatural intervention.

For example, consider one end of the spectrum, the widely viewed general revelation of the sun. Nearly everyone in the history of world has seen the sun and its effects. And in the sun, they have seen God's self-revelation. This is perhaps the most general type of general revelation imaginable. But consider also that in seeing the sun and its effects, all human beings are thereby obligated to a specific ethical response, which Jesus described in Matthew 5:44-45:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44-45).

The fact that the sun rises on evil people, warms them, and causes their crops to grow demonstrates that God is patient and kind even toward sinners who hate him. And since all human beings are responsible to imitate God's character, we are all responsible to love and pray for our enemies.

On the other end of the spectrum, some general revelation is known by so few people that it appears to be very similar to special revelation. For instance, consider the history of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we have already said, history is part of general revelation. As we see what events God allows and how he governs the world throughout time, we learn a great deal about him. And the history of redemption, particularly of the work of Jesus Christ, tells us a tremendous amount about God, ourselves, and salvation.

Listen to the way Paul expounded the history of the resurrection in Acts 17:30-31:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

Paul argued that the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was proof that God had set a day when he would judge the entire world. He also argued that the coming day of judgment obligates all men everywhere to repent. In other words, the general revelation of the historical fact of the resurrection obligates all people.

This type of general revelation is very similar to special revelation because it is rare and unusual. Not many people saw Jesus when he lived and died. And his life and death themselves were highly extraordinary; they were unlike any other human life or

death. His resurrection, in turn, was undeniably miraculous. Nevertheless, they do not reach the level of special revelation because they do not communicate how we are to repent or what total commitment to God fully entails.

Importance. In the second place, in Christian ethics we need to affirm the importance of general revelation to making ethical decisions. God holds all mankind accountable to recognize and conform to those aspects of his character that are revealed to them through creation and history.

At first, it may seem odd to many Christians that we would place such high value on what we learn about God through creation and history. After all, one of the hallmarks of Protestant theology is that we emphasize Scripture above all other types of revelation. But the truth of the matter is that even though we rightly exalt Scripture as the supreme form of revelation in our day, Protestants have always affirmed the validity and binding authority of general revelation. For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* begins in chapter 1, section 1 with these words:

The light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.

God has exhibited his character through what he has made and through his continual interaction with what he has made. And because God himself is our absolute norm, we are obligated to obey his self-revelation that comes to us through general revelation. Paul expressed these ideas in Romans 1:18-20, where he wrote:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:18-20).

General revelation is a standard or norm for belief about God that is binding on all people. And because general revelation is a binding norm, everyone who acts contrarily to what God has revealed is guilty of sin.

This same idea comes out rather clearly in Romans 1:32 where Paul added this comment on those who reject God as he reveals himself in creation:

They know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death (Romans 1:32).

Here Paul called general revelation a “decree.” Other translations render this word as “ordinance” or “judgment.” The basic idea, however, is clear: general revelation is a revealed standard that is obvious to everyone and that God commands everyone to obey.

Now, many people would disagree with Paul's assessment that this standard is obvious to everyone. Some of us no doubt feel that we have not learned these things from creation, and that this information is too specific to be gathered from nature and history. The same was also true in Paul's day, so the apostle included a discussion of why many people do not understand these facts from general revelation. In Romans 1:21 he explained:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

Paul was saying that even though general revelation speaks clearly to us, we reject its obvious meaning in favor of other meanings. Ancient unbelievers invented false gods. Modern unbelievers commonly attribute creation to chance. And even many Christians have become accustomed to think about the creation through the eyes of modern unbelief. Nevertheless, God's revelation in creation is still binding. It is still God's revealed standard to which we must conform.

Probably, Paul was drawing from Psalm 19 where David wrote in verse 1:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Psalm 19:1).

By all accounts, the heavens and the rest of the created world are perhaps the most general aspect of general revelation. Most people who have ever lived have been able to see the vastness of the sky. This type of knowledge is extremely common. And if even the most general of general revelation is binding and authoritative, certainly the more special forms of general revelation are authoritative too.

Having seen that general revelation comes in many forms and that all those forms reveal God's norms, we should look at special revelation as another revealed norm from God.

Special Revelation

Whether or not we find it easy to believe that general revelation is part of God's revealed standard for our lives, all Christians should easily recognize that special revelation is a norm that is binding on our lives. Just as we did with general revelation, we will focus on special revelation's complexity and importance to Christian ethics.

Complexity. In the first place, special revelation is complex, coming to us in a number of forms. Most of these forms rely on the spoken or written word, but all of them involve God communicating with people in ways that transcend the normal workings of creation. As we survey Scripture, we find many different examples of special revelation. In some cases God appears visibly and speaks audibly to groups or individuals. In other cases he is heard but not seen. At other times he communicates through a mediator such as an angel who appears to his people. God also commonly instructs those who have

received his special revelation to write down what has been revealed, and this written record is counted as Scripture, which is yet another form of special revelation.

Now, as varied as these different types of special revelation are, they are all “special” in a sense because they represent extraordinary or supernatural communication between God and man. They involve God interrupting, as it were, the natural course of events in order to communicate more directly with his people.

But even though these various types of revelation share this common bond, we can still distinguish between them because some come more directly from God with less mediation. Those that come through the more distant mediation are the least “special”; we may even think about them as bordering on general revelation. Those that come more directly from God, in turn, are the most “special.”

Moses spoke with God directly and personally. As we read in Exodus 33:11:

The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend (Exodus 33:11).

On the other end of the spectrum of special revelation we find things like dreams. The significance of special revelation in dreams lies not in the fact that the person dreams, but in the fact that God uses this natural phenomenon to communicate truth to the individual.

For instance, in Genesis 41 we find the account of Pharaoh’s dream of the seven lean cows that ate the seven fat cows. Certainly Pharaoh knew that the dream was supernatural, and this is proven by his appeal to his counselors to interpret it for him. But how did Pharaoh know his dream was supernatural? God did not directly address Pharaoh in the dream, or even send an angel to speak to him as he later did for Joseph in Matthew 1. The only thing special about Pharaoh’s dream was that God used it to communicate to Pharaoh. Apart from God’s use of the dream, this revelation was indistinguishable from dreams that occur as a normal part of general revelation.

In short, some special revelation is fantastic and obviously supernatural, such as God’s manifest presence with people like Moses. Other special revelation, however, closely resembles normal, natural human life.

In our day the most common form of special revelation (and the only universally acknowledged form of current revelation) is Scripture. And even Scripture itself has parts that are very special and other parts that are a bit more common. For example, according to Exodus 31:18, God directly wrote the Ten Commandments, which were contained on “tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.”

Other texts, however, were originally written by pagans who interpreted general revelation. For example, in Acts 17:28, Paul spoke these words to his Greek audience:

As some of your own poets have said, “We are [God’s] offspring” (Acts 17:28).

Here Paul affirmed the conclusions of the pagan poet, and thereby this pagan poet’s words became part of special revelation.

Other more common texts include certain proverbs collected by biblical writers, other quotes from pagan poets, and the copies of the letters between King Artaxerxes of Persia and his servants in the Trans-Euphrates region, which can be found in Ezra 4.

Special revelation is complex, coming to us in a number of forms. Most of those forms rely on the spoken or written word, but all of them involve God communicating with people in ways that transcend the normal workings of creation.

Importance. In the second place, all special revelation is important to Christian ethics because all special revelation is normative for us; all special revelation is a standard to which we must adhere. Consider, for example, that after Paul quoted the pagan poets Aratus and Cleanthes in Acts 17:28, he went on to draw an application from their words that is binding on all mankind. Listen to Acts 17:28-30:

**As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”
Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the
divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s
design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now
he commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:28-30).**

Despite the pagan origins of the words “We are his offspring,” Paul’s use of them as God’s authoritative apostle turned this quote into God’s special revelation to mankind, and made them a binding standard, obliging “all people everywhere to repent.”

And if even words of pagan origin can carry such force, certainly revelation that is more special obligates us even further. In fact, we see this conclusion affirmed by Scripture itself. For instance, listen to what God told the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 25:8-9 after they had repeatedly rejected his prophets:

**Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the
peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon
... and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and
against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them
and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin
(Jeremiah 25:8-9).**

Because the people had refused to listen to God’s prophets, God threatened extreme covenant judgment against them, warning them that he would bring them to “everlasting ruin” if they failed to repent. When God reveals truth through his authoritative representatives such as the biblical prophets and apostles, this special revelation is absolutely binding.

Now, in our day, we no longer have living authoritative apostles and prophets. But we do have the Bible, which is binding on all people at all times. Because Scripture is the most relevant form of special revelation for us today, we will discuss it in greater detail in our next two lessons. For now, however, we should turn our attention to existential revelation, which is God’s revelation through human persons.

Existential Revelation

Although it has not been common for theologians to speak about “existential revelation,” the idea that God reveals himself in and through persons has always been recognized by the mainstream of Protestant theology as a part of general revelation. In other words, we are not here advocating a new kind of revelation, but simply a different way of categorizing the same revelation that theologians have accepted for centuries.

For example, listen to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 1, section 10:

The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

The *Confession* states that the supreme judge in all controversies of religion is the Holy Spirit, and that the surest guide to the Holy Spirit’s judgment is Scripture. But notice that in appealing to Scripture as the ultimate revealed standard by which all others are judged, the *Confession* does not simply brush aside these others as useless or invalid. In fact, the *Confession* assumes the value of all the other sources that it lists. God uses councils, ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits to reveal his will to his people, even though their determinations must be subject to Scripture.

We can call these human judgments forms of “existential revelation.” None is a simple presentation of history or creation, and none is a direct supernatural communication from God. Instead, each involves God’s revelation through human beings, whether as the joint theological conclusions reached by groups of people, or as the judgments of individuals, or as the inward leading and illumination of the Holy Spirit within believers. As we did with general and special revelation, we will speak of the complexity of existential revelation and then of its importance for Christian ethics.

In the first place, existential revelation may be divided into two main categories: what we might call the external aspects of existential revelation, and the internal aspects of existential revelation.

External. The external aspects of existential revelation include such things as: human existence; human judgment, both individual and corporate; and human behavior. We can think of *human existence* as a form of revelation because human beings are created in the image of God. That is to say, in some sense, we are each a replica or reflection of God. Human beings are the images that reflect God’s glory and dignity. And because we reflect his character, we can learn many things about God by looking at people.

Our second point, that individual and corporate human judgment is a form of existential revelation, is closely related to the fact that we are created in God’s image. Listen to the way Moses recorded the history of the creation of mankind in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the

livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

Although we can draw many inferences from the fact that we are created in God’s image, when we first see this idea in Scripture, the meaning associated with it is that God delegates authority to human beings so that they will rule over the world. One implication of this is that when human beings exercise authority, we are revealing God’s character.

Another way we see this dynamic at work is in Genesis 2:19, where we read these words:

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name (Genesis 2:19).

This is the first example we find in Scripture of man exercising the authority that God delegated to us. And whatever else we may say about this example, it is at least true that when Adam named the animals he was thinking and exercising judgment. So, it is fair to say that when human beings think and judge in an exercise of divinely delegated authority, we are reflecting God’s character.

And this is precisely the type of activity to which the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is referring when it speaks of “councils ... ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits.”

For example, in Acts 15 we read that the church leaders met in Jerusalem in order to render judgment regarding the practices of Gentiles who converted to Christianity. The council, which was attended and supported by apostles such as Peter and Paul, sent a letter explaining its determinations to the various churches then in existence. In Acts 15:28-29 Luke records that their letter included the following words:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:28-29).

Notice that the Jerusalem council claimed to be speaking for itself as well as for the Holy Spirit. Their understanding was that God could use their joint deliberations in order to determine the proper course of action for the church. This is not to say that church councils are infallible but merely to point out that we have a biblical precedent for believing that God uses his corporately gathered people in order to reveal truth.

This is also the case when the church meets in smaller groups. Consider, for example, Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:16, 20:

Every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses... Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:16, 20).

Jesus taught that whenever two or three Christian witnesses rightly confirm a matter of church discipline, Jesus supports their exercise of the authority that he has delegated to the church. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that when Christians in smaller groups meet and render judgments, their judgments are not infallible, but it is still accurate to say that God uses individual and corporate judgments to guide his people into truth.

Besides human existence and judgment, God also uses human behavior as an external type of existential revelation. We see this frequently in Scripture when the biblical authors encourage their readers to imitate the behavior of others. For instance, 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord ... And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

Paul praised the Thessalonian believers for following his example, and for becoming an example for others to follow. Insofar as the behavior of Paul and the Thessalonians reflected God's character, it was a form of revelation. As a result, it became a norm or standard for ethical behavior.

Internal. In addition to these external types of existential revelation, there are also internal types of existential revelation. Although we might think of many ways that the Holy Spirit works within human beings to reveal truth about God, we will focus on two. First, we will explore what theologians have traditionally called "illumination." Second, we will investigate the "inward leading" of the Holy Spirit that is manifested in things like conscience.

When we speak of the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we are referring to a divine gift of understanding that God gives to believers, and even to unbelievers. When the Holy Spirit illumines a person's mind, he gives that person an ability or knowledge that the person previously lacked. One of the clearest examples of illumination can be found in Matthew 16:15-17 where we read the following account:

[Jesus asked,] "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:15-17).

Simon Peter did not figure out on his own that Jesus was the Christ, nor did he learn it from other people. Instead, God directly revealed that knowledge to Peter.

Of course, Peter was also confronted with Jesus himself, and his personal knowledge of Jesus was part of the process by which he came to understand that Jesus was the Christ. But many others who did not come to this understanding were also confronted with Jesus. The difference was that the Holy Spirit worked within Peter to bring him to this understanding.

Paul addressed the issue of the illumination of believers rather directly in 1 Corinthians 2 where he wrote these words in verses 11 and 12:

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2:11-12).

Paul's point was that even though believers and unbelievers alike may apprehend the same facts, they do not grasp them in the same way. All people are hindered in our understanding of revelation because they are limited created beings. But the Holy Spirit works within believers to give us a supernatural understanding of the gospel and God's truth. At the very least, all believers have a belief and trust in Jesus as savior that comes directly from the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote in Philippians 1:29:

It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ ... to believe on him (Philippians 1:29).

The Greek word here translated "granted" means "given freely." Paul's point is not that the Philippians were granted the opportunity to believe, but rather that God gave to them as a free gift their very faith in Jesus.

Interestingly, the Bible also teaches us that God illumines even unbelievers. We have already seen that God communicates truth to all unbelievers through general revelation, but according to Paul, God also communicates truth to unbelievers through illumination. Listen to Paul's words in Romans 2:14-15:

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law ... they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts ... their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (Romans 2:14-15).

In other words, God implants in every human being, even in unbelievers, a basic knowledge of his law. Regardless of our exposure to general revelation, we all instinctively know that certain things are right and wrong, and our consciences bear witness to this fact.

Beyond this, the Holy Spirit also provides what has often been called "inward leading." As opposed to illumination, which is primarily cognitive, inward leading tends to be more emotive and intuitive. It is one of the most common ways in which the Holy Spirit works within individuals to reveal truth about God's character. We see inward leading displayed clearly in things like our individual consciences, as well as in our often indescribable feelings that God would have us take a particular course of action. Paul referred to this elusive inward leading in Philippians 2:13 when he wrote:

It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:13).

Notice that Paul was not here speaking of what we know or believe, but rather of what we will or desire, of what motivates our actions. This too is a form of revelation

because it communicates impressions and intuitions about God's character to us. And just as with all forms of existential revelation, because it reveals God's character, it is a binding standard that we must obey and to which we must conform.

We have looked at the three categories of God's revelation, and we have seen how all of God's revelation provides us with norms that reveal the character of God. For now, however, we will explore the unity of these three categories of revealed norms.

UNITY

General, special, and existential revelation are all intimately related. All reveal the same God and therefore all reveal the same standard, and all are binding and authoritative. But what does this mean for us as we try to make biblical decisions? As you will recall, our model for biblical decision making is: "Ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person." In light of this model, the unity of God's general, special and existential revelation indicates that we should inform all our ethical judgments by all the revelation available to us. Of course, Scripture is entirely sufficient to instruct us regarding Christian ethics. General and existential revelation do not give us new information about God's character that is not contained in Scripture. But we will understand what Scripture teaches us much more clearly when we compare it to all the rest of God's revelation. In fact, without the general revelation of books and language, we would not even have access to the special revelation of Scripture. And of course, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, existential revelation, is critical to our comprehending the message of Scripture. Therefore, using all forms of God's revelation provides great insight to us as we apply Scripture to life.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored two aspects of the normative perspective in Christian ethics. We have seen that God himself is the ultimate standard for all ethical behavior and that his character obligates all human beings to imitate him. We have also seen that God himself is unknowable apart from his Word or revelation, so that we must receive his revelation in all of its forms as our revealed or practical standard.

As we seek to develop our ideas of Christian ethics, we must always be guided by God's character as it is revealed in nature and history, Scripture, and human beings. As we apply these concepts to our daily lives, we will find ourselves more fully equipped to make ethical decisions that are pleasing to God and that bring blessings to his people.