

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
SEVEN

THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
UNDERSTANDING THE FACTS



THIRD MILLENNIUM
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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Seven

The Situational Perspective: Understanding the Facts

INTRODUCTION

One of the most famous detectives in English literature is Sherlock Holmes. The fictitious Sherlock Holmes was supposed to be a very clever consultant who helped the police solve difficult cases. And Holmes' brilliance in solving cases was said to be twofold. On the one hand, he had great powers of observation so that he could discover all the relevant factual details of a case. And on the other hand, he was incredibly logical so that he could understand how these facts related to the crime he was trying to solve. Well, in some ways, making biblical decisions requires Christians to be like Sherlock Holmes. We have to identify many factual details. And we also have to figure out how all these facts relate to the ethical questions we are trying to answer.

This is the seventh lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it "The Situational Perspective: Understanding the Facts." Our goal in this lesson is to identify the major components of the ethical situations we encounter in the modern world, and to explain how each component bears on the ethical decisions we must make.

Throughout these lessons, our model for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. This outlook on ethics has reminded us that there are three major perspectives to be taken on every ethical issue: a focus on God's word which we have called the normative perspective; a focus on the person which we have called the existential perspective; and a focus on the situation which we have called the situational perspective. For some lessons now, we have been concentrating on various aspects of the situational perspective, and we will look further into this dimension of Christian ethics in this lesson as well.

You will recall that in earlier lessons we identified the most basic elements of our ethical situation as facts. These facts include everything that exists. In addition to this, we identified two special kinds of facts that are particularly important in ethics. First, we spoke of our goals, which are the intended or potential outcomes of our thoughts, words, and deeds. And second, we talked about means, which are the ways we reach our goals.

In this lesson, we will look in more detail at the broad category of facts in general. In particular, we will explore the importance of considering facts about God, the world around us, and human beings when we make ethical decisions.

Our lesson will divide into three parts. We will begin by identifying the fact of God himself, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Next, we will describe the facts of creation in general, looking at the various realms of nature. And finally, we will consider humanity as a critical element of our ethical situation. Let's turn first to God as the first and foremost fact in our ethical situation.

GOD

We speak of God as the ultimate fact in our situation because he is the one who gives existence and meaning to every other fact. Other facts exist only because God has created them and continues to sustain them. And they have meaning only because God authoritatively assigns meaning to them within his creation. And this means that we must always interpret every fact in light of God's existence and character. So, when we stop to consider the ethical importance of facts, it is important to begin with God.

Our discussion of God as the ultimate fact in Christian ethics will focus on three familiar aspects of God's character: his authority, which includes his right to rule over all creation; his control, which is his power and governance over all creation; and his presence, his existence and manifestation within creation. We will begin by looking at God's authority, or right to rule, over all creation.

AUTHORITY

From cover to cover the Scriptures make it clear that God has authority, the right to rule, over all of creation. This right to rule derives from the fact that God is the creator and sustainer of all creation. There is no remnant of creation that God does not bring into existence or that does not depend on him for its continued existence. God's authority as the creator has at least three basic attributes that we should always remember in Christian ethics: First, his authority is absolute. Second, it is exclusive. And third, it is exhaustive. Let's take a closer look at these ideas, starting with the absolute nature of God's authority as creator.

Absolute

God's authority is absolute in the sense that God has complete and total freedom over what he has created. Scripture often illustrates God's absolute authority by comparing it with the authority that a potter has over his clay. We find this motif in places like Isaiah 29:16, Isaiah 45:9, Jeremiah 18:1-10, and Romans 9:18-24. Listen to the way Paul spoke of God's authority in Romans 9:20-21:

Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:20-21).

Paul's rhetorical questions teach us that because God is the creator of all, he has the freedom and right to do whatever he wants with what he creates.

And what is true of God's absolute authority over people is also true of his authority over the rest of creation. God may do whatever he pleases with everything he

has made. He has the freedom and the right to act upon it as he sees fit, to require of it whatever he desires, and to judge it according to his own standards.

So, when God reveals his ethical judgments, they are true and never subject to scrutiny. In general terms, Christians usually accept the idea that God has the right to command them to determine their ethical judgments. But all too often, we refuse to accept God's ethical judgments unless they are confirmed by some other standard, and we look for excuses to avoid submitting to what he has clearly stated. But as we have seen, God's authority in ethics is absolute. His moral judgments, his outlook on good and evil, must be accepted as true simply because he has said so.

Exclusive

Second, besides having absolute authority, God also has exclusive authority over everything he has created.

When we say that God's authority as creator is exclusive, we mean that only God possesses absolute authority. Absolute authority belongs only to the creator, and God is the only creator. Therefore, God alone holds this ultimate authority. Other authorities exist, such as spirits, angels, and earthly rulers. And even individuals have a measure of authority over their own lives. But all these types of authority are delegated by God so that God's authority is always superior to creaturely authority. And as a result, every lesser authority can be overruled by the greater authority of the creator. This means that God's moral judgments are beyond legitimate questioning. And it is why the Bible insists that our ethical decisions be made in ultimate submission to God.

Exhaustive

Third, in addition to having absolute and exclusive authority, God also has exhaustive authority over the universe.

When we say that God's authority is exhaustive, we mean that it extends over everything he has created in every detail. And there are at least two important implications of this fact. First, all creatures are under God's authority. In other words, despite the fact that many human beings rebel against God and refuse to submit to his commands, his moral judgments apply to them. No matter where we live or who we are, and no matter what our culture or religion, all human beings are accountable to God. And second, because God has created all things, there is not one aspect of creation that is morally neutral. He has created everything for a purpose and assigned it a moral character. Everything in creation either functions as God wants it to and is therefore good, or is out of accord with his will and is therefore evil. The whole creation, down to its last detail, is subject to him. So, as we seek to serve God, we must always consider and submit to his authority.

Having explored God's authority, we should turn our attention to a second fact about God: his control over all creation — his powerful governing of everything that exists.

CONTROL

From the outset, we need to recognize that different branches of the Christian church understand God's control over his creation in different ways. But Christians agree to a large extent, because the Scriptures are very clear about certain aspects of God's control.

We will limit our discussion to two basic issues related to God's control over creation. First, we will speak of the sovereign character of God's control. And second, we will highlight the moral character of his control. Consider first the sovereign nature of God's control over creation.

Sovereign

Throughout the centuries, Christians have consistently affirmed God's sovereign control over creation. Of course, theologians and denominations have differed on some matters. But broadly speaking, Christians have always affirmed the biblical teaching that God has an unlimited ability and an unlimited right to control the creation in any way he sees fit. Furthermore, because he is a good and responsible king over his creation, he exercises his power and right for the benefit of his kingdom.

Unfortunately, in a variety of ways, both Christians and non-Christians have sometimes argued that God's sovereign control over his creation is incompatible with the idea of human moral responsibility. They have wrongly believed that both these ideas cannot be true. Either God is sovereign, or we are responsible — but not both. In recent years, this outlook has been expressed in a movement known as open theism. Open theism teaches that in order for God to hold human beings responsible for our ethical decisions and behavior, human beings must have ultimate control over our lives. It insists that if God has sovereign control over the universe, then he has no right to hold us responsible for what we do.

So, in order to preserve human ethical responsibility, open theism teaches that God has either limited his sovereignty voluntarily, or is by his very nature unable to control the entire creation. It concludes that God does not know what will happen, that he has only limited influence over things that happen in creation, and that he is often frustrated by the way that history unfolds. In short, open theism denies God's sovereign control in order to affirm human responsibility.

Now, historically, Christian theology has always taught that God's sovereign control is completely compatible with human responsibility. In fact, rather than seeing God's control as precluding human responsibility, Christian theology has followed the Scriptures by insisting that human beings are morally responsible to God precisely because God has sovereign control over creation. Let's unpack what we mean.

On the one side, many biblical passages teach that God has an all-encompassing plan for his creation and that he controls creation in order to carry out this plan. For instance, the Bible sometimes speaks of his unchanging purpose, as in Hebrews 6:17, or of the choices and plans he made before the foundation of the world, as in Matthew 13:35 and Ephesians 1:4. At other times, it refers to the plan by which he controls all creation,

as in Romans 8:28. It even speaks of his appointment of people and events, such as in Acts 4:28 and Romans 8:29.

Now, Christians have qualified God's control of the universe by relating it in various ways to things like his foreknowledge, his active and passive will, and his positive and permissive decrees. But in the final analysis, historical Christianity has always affirmed that because God is the Creator, he can and does exercise sovereign control over his creation.

On the other side, rather than seeing God's sovereign control as somehow contrary to ethical responsibility, Christianity has seen God's sovereign control as the basis for ethical responsibility. Listen to the way Paul stated the relationship between God's sovereign control and our responsibility in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Notice here that the Philippian Christians were to live morally and reverently because God was at work in their lives, causing them to will and to act according to his sovereign plan. In this way, his sovereign control of their lives was the basis of their moral responsibility. Rather than seeing divine sovereignty and human responsibility as mutually exclusive, Paul understood God's sovereignty to be the foundation for human responsibility.

Now that we have spoken of the sovereign character of God's control over creation, we are ready to speak about the moral character of his control — looking at the ways God has designed creation to be conducive to morality.

Moral

One very important principle in Christian ethics is that God does not force human beings into moral situations where there is no escape. Scripture teaches us that no matter how complex moral dilemmas appear, God always provides the means and the opportunity to avoid sin. This general principle is laid out in 1 Corinthians 10:13 where Paul wrote these words:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In its original context, this verse referred to the temptation to commit idolatry that the Corinthian church was undergoing. But the general principle is true as well: God does not allow us to be presented with situations in which all our options are sinful. He always orchestrates circumstances in such a way that we have a way out, a solution that is praiseworthy and not sinful.

Of course, sometimes this way of escape is not easily apparent. Most of us know from experience that some moral dilemmas are extremely difficult to solve. And to take advantage of the way out, we might first have to change ourselves in significant ways. But we can be sure that the opportunity for these types of changes is always there.

This is what we mean when we say that God's control is moral. He orders the creation so that the circumstances of our lives never excuse our unethical choices. He governs the entire universe so that there is always a way of escape from the temptation of sin.

Having considered God's authority and control as fundamental facts in our situation, we are ready to turn to a third aspect of God's character: his presence among us as he involves himself in the world.

PRESENCE

Our discussion of God's presence within creation will divide into three sections: First, we will speak of God as the covenant king. Second, we will speak of him as the incarnate Lord. Third, we will speak of him as ministering Spirit. Let's move first to God's role as covenant king over creation, and particularly over humanity.

Covenant King

God has been present with humanity as our covenant king ever since he created Adam and Eve. As we saw in a prior lesson, our first parents were created as God's images, his vassal kings whose job it was to spread God's kingdom throughout the earth. And God was manifestly present to bless them when they were faithful and to curse them when they sinned.

With the Fall of mankind into sin, God no longer walked with Adam and Even in the cool of the Garden. Nevertheless, God did not leave his creation; he remained present with the human race as our covenant king.

Of course, God has always been invisibly omnipresent. But he also appeared in many visible manifestations, such as the pillar of fire and cloud that we read about in Exodus 13. Besides this, he made his presence known through miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. He also was present in special ways with certain people, such as Elijah who called down fire from heaven in 2 Kings 1. God was frequently present as Israel's covenant king, offering protection and blessings to his people, and cursing and destroying their enemies. And God is still our king today, as Jesus taught in Matthew 5:34-35.

God's presence with us as our covenant king means that he is here to enforce his judgments over all the earth and its inhabitants. As Hebrews 4:13 puts it:

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13).

God sees everything because God is present everywhere. And he judges us on the basis of what he sees. You may recall that in earlier lessons we have defined Christian ethics as:

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

Our ethical decisions must always account for God's presence with us as judge, both now and in the future. And therefore, his presence with us as royal judge is always a critical fact to consider as we make ethical decisions. We do not live apart from God; we live in his presence under his judgment and blessing.

With God's role as covenant king in mind, we are ready to turn to God's presence with us as incarnate Lord in the person of Jesus Christ.

Incarnate Lord

When Jesus was born to Mary in Bethlehem, God became present with us in a new way. Perhaps the most obvious difference was that he was physically present and walked freely among society as one of us. Although we could list many, many ethical results of his incarnation, we will limit our discussion to four matters.

First, Hebrews 2:17 teaches that forgiveness of sins results from Jesus' human nature and physical presence on earth, particularly through his death on the cross. And this forgiveness makes it possible for God to bless us for our good works.

Second, it was through his earthly human life that Jesus gained firsthand sympathy for us in the midst of the temptations we face. Listen to the words of Hebrews 2:18:

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

By mediating before the Father in heaven, Jesus ensures that our works are judged mercifully, not harshly. And he motivates the Father to extend his grace toward us, strengthening us to resist sin and applying forgiveness to us on a daily basis.

Third, Jesus' earthly presence with us provides us with the supreme pattern of righteousness for all human life. Scripture records many details from Christ's life, and each one of them presents to us the picture of perfectly ethical behavior, thoughts, emotions, and judgment. And God is now conforming us to Christ's image, not only providing a model for us to imitate but also empowering us to be like him.

And fourth, our moral victory is ensured by Jesus' presence. Jesus' earthly ministry began the full restoration of the kingdom of God. By defeating his enemies and ours on the cross, Jesus enabled us to prevail in moral battles, and he ensured our ultimate victory.

We cannot be in Christ's human presence on earth right now. But his past presence on earth was critical for illustrating ethical behavior, and even for making

ethical behavior possible. And his continuing physical presence in heaven is an integral part of our ongoing ethical standing before God.

Now that we have spoken about God as our covenant king and incarnate Lord, we should turn to God's presence as our ministering Spirit, which is the most direct presence of God that we commonly encounter in the present age.

Ministering Spirit

When Jesus ascended into heaven he poured forth his Spirit on the church. The Holy Spirit ministers to us in numerous ways, but we will limit ourselves to two of his primary ministries among us. First, the Holy Spirit indwells individual believers, enabling and motivating us to make ethical decisions.

In Romans 8:9-10, the apostle Paul wrote these words about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

You ... are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness (Romans 8:9-10).

Paul said the Holy Spirit does at least two things that are central to Christian ethics: first, he gives us spiritual life, and second, he controls us. Let's consider each of these ideas in more detail.

Because of humanity's fall into sin, all human beings are born into a state of spiritual death. This makes us morally impotent; we have no ability to do anything that God ultimately considers to be good. But when the Holy Spirit gives us new life, he also gives us moral ability so that we can do good works. And this means that we can and should rely on the Holy Spirit to help us resist sin.

But the Holy Spirit changes our hearts and minds so that we love God and desire his blessings. In short, he gives us the desire to live ethically. And correspondingly, we have a moral obligation to submit to his control over our lives and to pursue our godly desires in place of our sinful desires.

Besides indwelling us, the Holy Spirit also ministers by gifting believers with supernatural abilities to perform works of service for the church. The Holy Spirit has gifted believers in various ways throughout history. Though the Spirit indwelled all believers even in the Old Testament, he gave spiritual gifting only to special individuals, such as prophets, priests and kings. But the Old Testament also looked forward to a day when the Spirit would be poured out on all of God's people. Listen to Peter's words in Acts 2:16-17:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:16-17).

Joel had prophesied of a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all believers, extending spiritual gifting to everyone he indwelt. And Peter taught that this came to pass at Pentecost. From that day forward, every believer in the church has been spiritually gifted.

From passages such as 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, as well as from church history, we know that some spiritual gifts are fairly common — things like serving, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, encouraging, contributing, and administration. The more spectacular gifts such as visions, miracles and tongues are less common. But regardless of which spiritual gifts we have, the point we want to make is this: the Holy Spirit bestows gifts in order to build up the church. So, whatever gifts we possess, our moral duty is to use them for the good of God's people. Listen to Paul's teaching on this matter in 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11:

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... All these [gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11).

One of the clear ethical implications of living in the presence of the Holy Spirit is that we are obligated to identify and use the gifts that God has given us.

Some of the most fundamental facts that we must consider in any ethical situation pertain to God himself: his absolute, exclusive, exhaustive authority; his sovereign and moral control over creation; and his presence with us as covenant king, incarnate Lord, and ministering Spirit. When we ground ourselves in a proper understanding of who God is, we are much better prepared to make decisions that please him, and bring his blessings to us.

Having identified the facts related to God himself, we are ready to turn to the facts that make up creation in general, including both its physical and its spiritual aspects.

CREATION

Traditional systematic theology has spoken of everything that exists as primarily inhabiting one of three basic realms. First, there is the supernatural realm, that realm that is above nature. Although we often use this term to refer to anything that is not part of our natural world, it has a more technical use in systematic theology. Specifically, it refers to God and his works, since only God himself is truly higher, more powerful, and more authoritative than the natural world.

Second, there is the natural realm. This is the world God created in Genesis 1, the world in which we live and operate. And without a doubt, it is the side of creation that is most familiar to human beings.

And third, there is the preternatural realm, that realm that is beyond nature. It is not above nature in the way that God is, but is rather beside nature as a distinct aspect of creation. This is the realm inhabited by invisible spirits such as angels and demons.

In line with this traditional understanding, our discussion of the facts of creation will divide into two parts. First, we will look at the preternatural aspects of creation, considering how the spiritual realm inhabited by angels and demons relates to Christian ethics. And second, we will address the natural world and its relationship to ethics. Let's begin with the preternatural, invisible aspects of creation.

PRETERNATURAL

Unfortunately, modern Christians, especially in western cultures, often pay little attention to the invisible angels and demons that surround and interact with us. And this should not be surprising. After all, our human experience is typically limited to the natural world. We constantly interact with other people as well as with our physical environment, and we normally try to explain most of the world and events around us as natural phenomena. So, we rarely place much emphasis on the preternatural world. But the fact is that angels and demons have a significant impact on the things that happen in our lives. And as a result, the preternatural world is an important consideration when it comes to making ethical decisions.

We will consider the preternatural aspects of creation under two separate headings related to Christian ethics. First, we will describe the inhabitants of the preternatural realm and their relationship to the natural world. And second, we will turn to the topic of spiritual warfare, the cosmic struggle between good and evil that rages all around us. Let's turn first to the inhabitants of the preternatural realm, namely, the angels and the demons.

Inhabitants

Modern science speaks of humanity as largely alone in the universe of rational creatures. We all realize that we live on a relatively small planet circling a relatively small sun in a vast galaxy that is only a tiny part of the universe.

But Scripture teaches that God has also populated the universe with a vast number of spiritual persons known as angels and demons. Both angels and demons are intelligent, rational beings that have wills and personalities.

When God created these beings, they were all angels — pure and perfect, serving God in his heavenly kingdom. But some of these angels willfully rebelled against God, and fell from this blessed state into condemnation. The Bible commonly uses the term angels to refer to those blessed angels who remained loyal to God, and often refers to the fallen, rebellious angels as demons. Both angels and demons have influence over many things that happen in the natural world.

We will look at the impact that both angels and demons have in our ethical environment. Let's begin with the topic of angels before addressing the subject of demons.

Angels serve as God's loyal messengers and agents. They communicate his word to human beings, and they interact with humanity on God's behalf. Sometimes these are dramatic events. For example, in 2 Kings 19:35 we learn that the angel of the Lord slew one hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrian troops in one night in order to halt Sennacherib's invasion of Judah. But at other times angels work in more mundane ways. For instance, Psalm 91:11-12 teaches that angels also work to prevent God's faithful followers from stubbing their toes.

Hebrews 1:14 summarizes the important work of the angels by asking this rhetorical question:

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14).

And the answer, of course, is "yes." But what does this ministry have to do with our ethical decisions?

For one thing, God's angels are constantly working to ensure that we always have an opportunity to behave morally. Their service should make us more confident of God's care and provision. And this confidence should encourage us to make ethical decisions even when these decisions create difficulties for us.

Beyond this, God is actually using our salvation to teach wisdom to his angels in heaven. Angels need no salvation, and salvation is not available to demons. As a result, salvation is mysterious to them. So, by observing God's salvation of humanity, they learn more about the Lord's glory and are better able to praise him.

The New Testament speaks about this in many places, including in Ephesians 3:10 where Paul wrote these words:

[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3:10).

As we repent of sin and are blessed by God, the angels learn more about the Lord's ways and render him greater praise. So, one important factor to consider in our ethical decisions is the ways our decisions lead angels to praise and honor God.

With this understanding of angels in mind, we should turn our attention to demons and to the role they play as facts in our situation.

Like angels, demons are able to interact with the natural realm, which they do in order to harm us. In the New Testament, the most commonly mentioned way demons attack Christians is by tempting them into idolatry.

Scripture also indicates that demons can harm us in other ways, as well. For instance, in Job 1-2 we find that Satan, the chief of demons, was permitted to destroy Job's possessions and health, and to kill his family. Now, as we learn in these chapters, this was an unusual circumstance in which God permitted Satan to have so much

influence in Job's life. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the kinds of things that demons can do in the natural realm.

As we will see in the next section, the activities of demons have many implications for our lives. They constantly tempt us, trying to lead us away from moral choices. And for this reason, we must always remember that they are an important fact in our situation.

Now, there are countless moral implications that we might draw from the activities of the inhabitants of the preternatural realm. But for our purposes, we will focus on the spiritual warfare that goes on between them and how it affects our lives in the natural realm.

Spiritual Warfare

Ever since Satan and the rest of the demons rebelled against God, they have been locked in battle against God's holy angels. Because this conflict is fought between good and evil spirits, namely angels and demons, we often speak of it as spiritual warfare. This warfare is mentioned frequently in Scripture, but perhaps the best known passage is Paul's teaching on the armor of God in Ephesians 6. Listen to Paul's words from Ephesians 6:12:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

Here Paul indicated that our enemies include the demonic rulers, authorities, powers and forces in the preternatural world. This spiritual warfare is a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Moreover, it influences us in ethical ways as angels help us find ways to obey God and demons tempt us to sin.

The good news is that Jesus has crippled the demons' ability to overtake us. Through his death and resurrection, he has already conquered all of his enemies. Paul taught this fact in Colossians 2:15, writing these encouraging words:

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

But even though Christ has won the war, the demons still persist in skirmishes against us. And they will continue to attack us until God judges them on the last day. For this reason, we must be vigilant soldiers, dressed for battle in the armor of God, relying on the Lord's grace for strength to stand against the demonic hordes. We must never forget that this spiritual warfare is a real and powerful element in our ethical situation.

With this understanding of the preternatural world in mind, we are ready to address the ethical implications of the natural, material world in which we live.

NATURAL

The details of the natural world are nearly limitless, so we will focus our attention on the natural world as a whole. First, we will speak of the place of the natural world in its original condition at creation. Second, we will look at the ways that humanity's fall into sin has impacted the natural world. And third, we will discuss the implications that humanity's redemption from sin has for the natural world. Let's begin with the topic of creation, and with the role that the natural world plays within it.

Creation

In Genesis 1, Moses described the creation of the entire natural realm in a way that emphasized the central importance of humanity upon the earth. From his account, we can see that human beings are part of nature. According to Genesis 2:7, God created us from the dust of the ground. And because we are part of nature, we have an ethical obligation to protect it.

Moses also made it clear that human beings are lords or rulers over nature. God did not create us to be equals with the plants and animals, but to rule over them. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:28:

God blessed [humanity] and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

From the very beginning, God has called human beings to govern the world — to administer it in a way that promotes life and growth, turning the world into a kingdom that is fit for him to inhabit.

Now that we have looked at the original state of the natural realm at creation, let's turn our attention to humanity's fall into sin, and particularly to the impact it had on the natural world.

Fall

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God responded by cursing both the human race and the earth, subjecting them to corruption. This caused the earth to oppose the lordship of humanity in many ways. For instance, it became difficult for human beings to work the land to make it produce food. We read about this in Genesis 3:17-19, where God laid the following curse on Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for

you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food (Genesis 3:17-19).

As a result of this curse, the natural world is affected by sin in many ways. We might summarize the situation of the natural realm in this way: nature is both the recipient of God's cursing and the instrument of God's cursing. That is to say, nature is both corrupted by sin and is often hostile toward us. These are important details of our natural situation to take into account in ethics. Nature is not as it was originally designed to be; it often complicates our ethical decisions because it is corrupted by sin, and it often serves as God's instrument of discipline for us.

At the same time, the natural world has not been completely corrupted by the Fall. The earth still belongs to God, and so does everything in it. It still proclaims his goodness and majesty, and God still uses it to provide us with many good things. As we read in Psalm 19:1:

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

And as Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:4-5:

Everything [that] God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Nature is still good. It is still God's creation, and it is still a means God uses to minister to us and to bless us. So, when we face ethical questions, we must always remember that both the corruption and the blessings of nature continue to be important features of our situation.

Having spoken about nature with regard to both creation and the fall into sin, we are ready to turn to the topic of redemption and to the role that the natural realm plays in redemptive history.

Redemption

When humanity fell into sin, the natural realm became both an instrument of cursing and a recipient of cursing. But in redemption, both of these effects are reversed. The natural realm becomes an instrument of redemption, as God works within the natural realm to accomplish redemption for human beings. And it also becomes a recipient of redemption, as God purges corruption from the natural world through the redemption of humanity.

Nature functions as a means of redemption in a number of ways. For one thing, God uses things in the natural realm as tools in the redemptive process. Events in the natural world testify to God's greatness. They present opportunities for us to believe in him for salvation. And they place us in circumstances that lead to our spiritual growth and victory. For another, God sometimes overrides the normal, natural order in

miraculous ways, changing nature so that it presents us with signs and wonders that build our faith. Consider Romans 8:28 where Paul wrote these words:

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

By the term “all things,” Paul meant every circumstance, every event, every creature, every object, every thought — everything. And that includes everything that exists or happens in the natural world. God is controlling all of it to our benefit, furthering our redemption.

So, when we are faced with ethical choices, we need to ask questions like, what is God teaching me through my experiences of the natural world? How can my interactions with the natural world help me to become more like Christ? And how can I use the natural world to bring glory to God?

Beyond this, the natural realm itself will ultimately be a recipient of redemption. God will refine both heaven and the earth to create a new heaven and new earth. Scripture mentions this new creation in many places, such as Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1. Passages like these indicate that the corruption of the natural world will last until humanity’s redemption is completed at Christ’s return. At that point, the earth will be brought to the glorious destiny that God ordained for it from the beginning. Paul wrote about this in Romans 8:19, 21, where we find these words:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed... The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:19, 21).

The fact that God is redeeming the natural world indicates that he places great value on it. So, as we make ethical decisions, we also need to consider how our choices will impact the natural creation. And that means that we have to ask questions like: What effect will my decisions have on the natural world? How can I increase and improve humanity’s dominion over the earth? And how can I promote a world fit for God’s glorious presence? Whenever we approach an ethical question, we have to take account of the ways that the creation influences us. And we have to remember how our actions impact the creation as well.

Now that we have identified the basic facts pertaining to God himself, as well as the facts of creation in general, we are ready to consider the facts related to humanity, the pinnacle of God’s creation.

HUMANITY

We will address the facts related to humanity in two ways. First, we will consider humanity in the context of society, looking at the facts related to our attempts to live with

others. And second, we will speak of human beings as individuals, focusing on our attempts to live with ourselves. Let's turn our attention at this point to human society as an important feature of our situation.

SOCIETY

We will look at three aspects of society that relate to our study of Christian ethics. First, we will consider the corporate solidarity of human society, the way that God views the human race as a unified group. Second, we will speak briefly of the commonality of our human experiences. And third, we will mention human community. Let's look first at the solidarity of human society as we stand before God.

Solidarity

In our discussion of humanity's corporate solidarity, we will speak of the cultural mandate as a corporate task that was given to humanity at creation. And we will speak of the Fall as a corporate failure for the human race that resulted in corporate consequences. Finally, we will look at redemption as the corporate reconstitution of human society. Let's think first about humanity's corporate task within creation, namely the cultural mandate.

In a prior lesson, we spoke of the cultural mandate as God's command that human beings expand his kingdom to the ends of the earth through the development of human culture. This mandate was given directly to Adam and Eve when they were created. Listen to God's words to our first parents in Genesis 1:28:

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it
(Genesis 1:28).**

Of course, God never intended Adam to father and Eve to bear enough children to fill the entire planet with people and cultures. Rather, he intended them to be the first of many generations of human beings. And he intended that the human race would corporately fulfill this mandate.

As a result, all human beings have solidarity with each other. That is to say, God has assigned this task of filling and subduing the earth to the human race as a whole as a singular corporate entity. But God has not assigned every aspect of the cultural mandate to every individual. The cultural mandate obligates humanity as a whole to reproduce and to build cultures. And the moral obligation of the individual is merely to do his or her part, to cooperate with all of humanity in accomplishing this corporate task.

This corporate solidarity of the human race in the cultural mandate teaches us something very important about ethics. It teaches us that from the very beginning, God has intended human beings to take other people into account when we make individual decisions. We have to consider how our decisions will affect them, as well as how we can

work together to accomplish our corporate task of expanding God's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

With the corporate task of humanity in mind, let's address the topic of our corporate failure when the human race fell into sin.

When God created Adam and Eve, he assigned them the corporate task of the cultural mandate. But he also assigned them individual roles that contributed to the success of that task. Then, in the Fall, Adam and Eve each violated their assigned individual roles, and in the process they violated the corporate task they had been given. In this way, the Fall involved not only the sins of Adam and Eve as individuals but also the breakdown of their relationship, their God-ordained family structure. And so the human race was united in its rebellion against God.

The fact that the Fall was a corporate failure has far reaching implications for Christian ethics. It means that we have an obligation not only to be ethically pure as individuals, but also to promote the morality of other individuals. It shows that we are required to form families and societies, and to establish ethical practices within those relationships. And it teaches us that we need to be wary of the temptations that come to us through those relationships.

Now that we have considered the corporate task of humanity and our corporate failure in that task, we should turn our attention to the corporate consequences of humanity's fall into sin.

In order to understand the corporate consequences of the Fall, it helps to remember that when God created Adam and Eve, he entered into a covenant with them. Among other things, this covenant required Adam and Eve to obey God, and it defined the consequences of their obedience or disobedience. But this covenant did not just govern God's relationship with Adam and Eve as individuals. Rather, it governed Adam and Eve collectively. In fact, Scripture teaches that every human being who has ever existed or ever will exist was included in this covenant.

So, when Adam and Eve violated God's covenant by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the consequences for their disobedience fell not only on them, but also on their posterity. Because of the corporate solidarity of the human race, this one transgression condemned every individual of the human race to the covenant curses. As Paul summarized it in Romans 5:18:

The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men (Romans 5:18).

The only exception to this was Jesus, who did not descend from Adam and Eve after the manner of normal human reproduction, but was conceived in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit. Every other human being fell under the covenant curses when Adam sinned.

As a consequence of the Fall, the rest of us are born under God's curse of death, and destined to eternal judgment. And in addition to being born guilty and condemned, we are also born corrupt, indwelt and enslaved by sin and incapable of doing anything good. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:7-8:

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Romans 8:7-8).

In fact, the consequences of the Fall are so severe that apart from God's work of redemption, there is no way for us to think, say, or do anything that is truly ethical.

Because we are so corrupted by sin, we always have to question our moral instincts and intuitions. We cannot simply follow our hearts, imagining that they will always lead us into ethical purity.

One consequence of this universal problem of sin is that the human race does not fulfill the cultural mandate in the way God intended. We build and expand human civilization throughout the world, but indwelling sin commonly causes us to build in a way that fails to honor and glorify God.

We are supposed to help one another in the task of building God's kingdom on earth, but the corruption of sin turns us into hindrances. So consequently, as we seek to bring glory to God, we not only have to work positively to build his kingdom, but we have to maintain a vigilant watch for sin. We have to test and prove our own motives and behaviors as well as those of the people around us.

Having considered humanity's corporate task and corporate failure, as well as the corporate consequences of that failure, let's turn to the corporate reconstitution of our human social structures.

In the modern world, it is common for Christians to focus on the individual aspects of salvation — things like forgiveness of sin, and eternal life for individual people. But as we have seen in prior lessons, God's plan for creation is not simply to save a host of individual believers. Rather, it is to build a kingdom; it is to build a new social structure and a new society inhabited by renewed people. Listen to 1 Peter 2:9 where Peter described the church in corporate terms:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).

God is not simply redeeming individuals. Rather, he is redeeming a people, a priesthood, a nation. That is to say, he is redeeming individuals and placing them in redeemed societies.

We are all aware that Jesus is our king, and that we are his kingdom. And we all recognize that he has ordained social and authority structures for his people even today, such as families and church offices. And when Jesus returns in the future, corporate social structures will be completely redeemed as well. And these facts are important to the ethical decisions we make. We need to focus not only on our personal redemption but also on the maintenance of godly social structures, such as families, church congregations, even nations, which are all part of the great kingdom that God is building on earth.

Now that we have explained the corporate solidarity of the human race in our dealings with God, we should consider the facts related to the commonality of our human experiences.

Commonality

Within the human race, we are divided into many smaller groups of people. We are members of nations, cultures, sub-cultures, churches, families and so on. Our histories are not simply biographies of individuals but accounts about nations and people groups. We exist and govern ourselves in social structures such as families and countries. And we have shared cultures that bind us together with clothing styles, food, music, art, architecture, and many other things. Within each of these social groups, there are fundamental similarities that bind the group together. These similarities and differences have to be taken into consideration when we make ethical decisions.

A concise summary of this idea can be found in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22, where Paul wrote these words:

To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) ... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law)... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).

Paul taught that it is important for us to adapt our behavior to the shared experiences of the people around us. He took into consideration the human social contexts in which he found himself, and he changed his behavior in the light of what he saw. For instance, he followed Jewish traditions in Jewish settings, and Gentile practices in Gentile settings. Of course, he made sure not to violate anything that the Scriptures taught. But to the extent that he was able, he conformed his application of God's law to the shared experiences of those around him. And following his example, we must do the same.

Having spoken of the corporate solidarity of the human race before God, and of the importance of commonality in our human experiences, we are ready to consider the subject of community, the facts related to our normal interactions with each other, whether as members of the human race, or of a smaller group, or as individuals.

Community

We will divide the topic of community into two parts. First, we will consider the impact that human beings have on each other. And second, we will address the responsibilities we bear toward each other. Let's begin with the impact that individuals have on others within their community.

There can be no doubt that the decisions and actions of individuals often impact the people around them. When these decisions and actions conform to the teachings of Scripture, they impact others in ways that glorify God. When they are not, they impact others in ways that promote sin. We impact others in our community in innumerable

ways. But for the sake of this lesson, we will focus our discussion on the impact that believers have on each other in the church.

In 1 Corinthians 12:26-27 Paul described the impact that Christians have on each other by using the metaphor of the human body. Listen to what he wrote there:

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:26-27).

In this passage, Paul taught that Christians must treat one another with honor and respect, because what happens to one Christian affects every believer in the world. In this sense the impact that we have on each other is very broad, so that we must always take the whole church into consideration each time we make decisions. To the extent that we are able to determine the impact our actions will have on other believers, we must make decisions that benefit them and do not hurt them, and that promote them to behave in ethical ways.

Paul gave a very concrete example of this in 1 Corinthians 8 where he gave instructions regarding food that had been sacrificed to idols. In general, he taught that it was acceptable for Christians to eat this food. But he qualified this by saying that if eating this food caused other believers to fall into the sin of idolatry, then Christians should abstain from these foods. Listen to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:13:

If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall (1 Corinthians 8:13).

In order for our decisions to be biblical, we must consider the impact our actions have on others.

Knowing the importance of the impact we have on each other, we should turn our attention to the related topic of the responsibilities we bear toward one another. As we did when discussing the impact we have on others, we will focus particularly on the responsibilities that we bear toward each other in the church.

Scripture teaches us about our responsibilities toward each other in many places. So, for the sake of illustration, we will focus on the Lord's command that we love one another. This command is mentioned frequently in Scripture, but let's look at the way that John spoke about it in his first epistle. Listen to the words of 1 John 3:11-18:

We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:11-18).

John indicated that we have a responsibility to love one another in the same way that Jesus loved us. And this responsibility encompasses all of life. It demands our time, our

money, our possessions, even our lives. And this is a responsibility that must be reflected in all our ethical decisions.

Now that we have addressed the facts related to living with others in human society, we are ready to turn our attention to ourselves as individuals.

INDIVIDUALS

As we have seen, human beings have many things in common. We are all responsible to the same God. We live in the same natural world and are influenced by the same preternatural forces. And we live in societies with many others who are like us. But there are also many important ways in which every person is unique. We all have different personalities, different histories, different abilities, and so on. And these individual differences are important facts to consider when we are faced with ethical choices.

We will speak of four types of facts related to human beings as individuals. First, we will speak of personal character. Second, we will mention the significance of the experiences of each individual. Third, we will address the matter of the human body and its influence. And fourth, we will consider the importance of the roles God has assigned to each person. Let's begin with personal character as an important fact in our situation.

Character

When we speak of character, we have in mind things like our individual preferences and temptations, as well as our sanctification. Each one of us has certain strengths and weaknesses. And each of us has a unique personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. And all of these factors influence our ability and inclination to make decisions that honor God.

In addition to matters of personal character, we must also factor in the experiences of each individual when we are making ethical decisions.

Experiences

Personal experiences are a bit like fingerprints. All fingerprints are made up of ridges that form patterns, such as arches and loops and whorls. And although everyone has fingerprints composed of these common elements, each fingerprint is unique.

And the same thing is true of our experiences. Most of our experiences are very common, but the combination of experiences is unique to each person. In the category of our experiences, we might include such things as our heredity, our maturity, our education, our opportunities, our status and position, and of course, everything we ever think, say or do. And as features of our ethical situation, these experiences partially determine our moral responsibilities.

Now, in one sense we all face the same temptation, namely, the temptation to violate God's law. But each of us feels this temptation in a different way. For instance, we are all tempted to steal, but the specific details of this temptation differ for each of us. And we are all tempted sexually, but the specific temptations we face vary from individual to individual. So, when we approach the topic of Christian ethics, we need to recognize that each one of us fights a unique spiritual battle. And the details of our unique battles are important facts that we need to consider.

For example, with regard to our heredity, we are all to honor our parents. But we do not all share the same parents. Rather, we are each to honor our own parents. And with regard to maturity, the way we are to honor our parents changes as we age. When we are young, we are to honor them largely by obeying and respecting them. When we mature and our parents are very old, we may need to honor them in different ways, such as by caring for their physical needs. Each experience presents us with consequent responsibilities that are in some ways unique to us. And when we are faced with ethical questions, these are important facts that we need to consider.

With these understandings of character and personal experiences in mind, we should turn to the facts related to the human body and to the influence they bear on our ethical situation.

Body

There are many facts related to our bodies that come into play in ethical situations, such as our physical age, our abilities and disabilities, our genetics, and our intellectual abilities. For instance, in Deuteronomy 1:35-39 God distinguished between adults and children in Israel in this way:

Not a man of this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your forefathers, except Caleb ... [and] Joshua... And the little ones ... your children who do not yet know good from bad — they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it (Deuteronomy 1:35-39).

When the nation of Israel rebelled against God in the wilderness, the Lord condemned the entire adult generation, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. But he did not condemn the children of this generation because they did not yet know good from bad. In this and many other ways, Scripture indicates that our ethical obligations are partially determined by our physical maturity and our intellectual abilities.

But Scripture also teaches that some facts related to our bodies are not sufficient to influence our ethical obligations. As the most prominent example in Scripture, consider the fact that sin inhabits our bodies, preventing us from being able to obey God. Yet, God does not overlook the sins we commit as a result of this problem residing in our bodies. Listen to Paul's description of this problem in Romans 7:18-24:

Nothing good dwells ... in my flesh ... For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members

**of my body ... making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members... Who will set me free from the body of this death?
(Romans 7:18-24, NASB).**

The sin that indwells our bodies moves us to sin. But as Paul showed, the solution to this dilemma is not to deny our guilt but to cry out for a savior.

And the relationship between genetics and behavior is similar to this. Many scientists have suggested that there are correspondences between genetics, on the one hand, and behaviors such as criminal violence, alcoholism, and homosexuality on the other hand. So, it may be true that our genes as well as indwelling sin make it more difficult for us to obey the Lord's commands. Nevertheless, God's commands are normative for us. So, even when our bodies make it easy and natural for us to sin, they do not excuse us from sins that the Bible clearly condemns.

Now that we have looked at the facts related to character, personal experiences, and the human body, we are ready to address the ethical significance of the roles that God has assigned to each of us.

Roles

Each of us has multiple roles in life. In the secular world, we often fill roles such as parent, child, sibling, spouse, employer, employee, and many others as well. Beyond this, God has called people to different positions and jobs within the church so that we have elders, deacons, evangelists, teachers, and so on. And whether or not we hold a position in the church, God has spiritually gifted each believer in different ways, and he expects us to use our gifts to minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And each of these roles presents us with particular temptations and responsibilities.

For instance, if we are ministers in the church, it is our responsibility to govern, teach and reprove God's people in a wise and godly fashion. But if we are children in the church, we would be wrong to assume this type of authority and behavior. As another example, consider the fact that the New Testament teaches able-bodied adults, and especially husbands and fathers, to work to support themselves and their families. As Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:8:

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

So, we can see that it is the responsibility of some people to work to support others, specifically those that are in the role of family provider. And correspondingly, when we are charged with providing for our families, we face the temptation to avoid this responsibility.

To one degree or another, this same thing is true of every other role we fill. Each role opens us to particular temptations and lays on us particular responsibilities, and in this way each role is an important and complex fact in our ethical situation.

So, we see that when it comes to making biblical decisions, there are many facts that we must take into account that are related to our existence as human beings, both as members of society living with each other, and as individuals living with ourselves.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have outlined the major categories of facts we must keep in mind in order to answer ethical questions in a biblical manner. We have identified a number of important facts about God himself, especially his authority, control and presence. We have described the facts that make up creation in general, looking at both the natural and the preternatural realms. And we have considered humanity both in the context of society and on an individual level. These three basic categories give us a good starting point for analyzing the facts of our ethical situation.

When we approach ethics from the situational perspective, it is extremely important that we recognize and account for all the facts that influence our responsibilities before God. The most basic of these facts are always God's existence and character, but the facts related to our surroundings and to ourselves also place ethical obligations on us. So, the more facts we account for, the more confidence we can have that our ethical choices are truly biblical decisions.