

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 7

The Situational Perspective:
Understanding the Facts

Manuscript



thirdmill

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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've entitled it, "The Situational Perspective: Understanding the Facts." Our goal in this lesson is to identify the major components of our ethical situations, and to explain how each component affects our ethical decisions. 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 reminds us that there are three major perspectives on every ethical issue: a focus on God's Word, which we've called the normative perspective; a focus on the situation, which we've called the situational perspective; and a focus on the person, which we've called the existential perspective. In this lesson, we'll look further into the situational dimension of Christian ethics.

In earlier lessons, we identified the most basic elements of our ethical situation as facts, which include everything that exists. We also spoke of our goals, which are the intended or potential outcomes of our thoughts, words, and deeds. And we talked about means, which are the ways we reach our goals.

In this lesson, we'll look in more detail at the broad category of facts. In particular, we'll explore the facts about God, the world around us, and human beings when we make ethical decisions. Our lesson will divide into three parts. We'll begin by identifying the fact of God himself, the one in whom "we live and move and have our being." Next, we'll describe the facts of creation in general, looking at the various realms of nature. And finally, we'll 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'll begin by looking at God's authority.

AUTHORITY

From cover to cover, the Scriptures make it clear that God has authority to rule over all 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.

Absolute

God is king, ruling and reigning with all authority in the heavenly realm... In the book of Job, in the very beginning of that book, we see where Satan presents himself to almighty God. Now, Satan's not just coming into the presence of God. He's presenting himself, acknowledging that he is subject to God's authority, to God's realm and rule. So even the Enemy has to acknowledge that God rules everything.

— Dr. Jay Haley

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:

Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump

one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable 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.

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've 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. 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's 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. There are at least two important implications of this fact. First, *all* creatures are under God's authority. 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.

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

Sovereign

There is no aspect of God's creation outside of his sovereignty or authority. To say that there are things outside of his sovereignty would say that he is not omnipotent, he is not omniscient, he is not, you know, omnipresent in that regard there. And so, that would mean that there exists perhaps some other entity or metaphysical force that he had no sovereignty over, no control or authority over. And we know him to be sovereign, and to be sovereign that he is Lord of all that he has created.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

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, 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 either God is sovereign, *or* we are responsible — but not both.

This outlook has been expressed in a movement known as "open theism." Open theism teaches that for God to hold human beings responsible for our ethical decisions and behavior, human beings must have ultimate control over our lives. Those who follow this movement insist that if God has sovereign control over the universe, then he has no

right to hold us responsible for what we do. So, 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 followed the Scriptures and taught that God's sovereign control is completely compatible with human responsibility. The Bible doesn't see God's control as precluding human responsibility. Rather, it teaches that human beings are morally responsible to God precisely *because* God has sovereign control over creation.

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, Scripture 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 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, Christian theology has seen God's sovereign control as the *basis* for ethical responsibility. Listen to Philippians 2:12-13 and the way Paul stated the relationship between God's sovereign control and our responsibility. He said:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (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 work" according to his sovereign plan. In this way, his sovereign control over their lives was the basis of their moral responsibility. Paul understood God's sovereignty to be the foundation for human responsibility, rather than seeing divine sovereignty and human responsibility as mutually exclusive.

Now that we've spoken of the sovereign character of God's control over creation, we're ready to speak about the moral character of his control.

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 overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In its original context, this verse referred to the temptation among the Corinthian believers to commit idolatry. 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. 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'll speak of God as the covenant king. Second, we'll speak of him as the incarnate Lord. And third, we'll speak of him as our ministering Spirit. Let's move first to God's role as covenant king over creation, and in particular, 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, priestly 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 humanity into sin, God no longer walked with Adam and Eve 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's also appeared in many visible manifestations, such as the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that we read about in Exodus 13:21, 22. 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 1:9-12. 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:

No creature is hidden from [God's] sight, but all are naked and exposed to 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.

We use this word “omnipresent” to describe that God is everywhere at all times, that he is in the smallest place and the biggest place... The fact that God is everywhere is intended to be both law and gospel for us. I can't hide from him what I'm doing that's wrong — the law side of things — so I can't go somewhere over here, where God doesn't see, and do my dirty business and then come back and, you know, be all sweetness and light. But on the other hand, the gospel side of that is true. I can't wind up so low, so far away, that God is unable to reach to my particular situation and bring his love and his grace and his forgiveness.

— Dr. Jeffery Moore

You may recall that in earlier lessons we defined Christian ethics as:

theology viewed as a means of determining which 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 our covenant king 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're 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 ethical results of his incarnation, we'll 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. Consider the words of Hebrews 2:18:

Because he himself has suffered when 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 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.

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

Ministering Spirit

The Holy Spirit ministers to us in numerous ways, but we'll limit ourselves to two. First, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that regenerates individual believers enables and motivates us to make ethical decisions.

The Spirit is not external to us, helping us, aiding us, but he actually dwells in us. That is, his presence, his power, all of his resources are available to us as he dwells in us... This is a great comfort to us. It's great assurance for us that the Spirit is dwelling in us so that we have the very presence of God in our lives. And this should motivate us to live for Jesus Christ because the Spirit is dwelling in us.

— Dr. Gregg R. Allison

In Romans 8:9-10, the apostle Paul wrote these words:

You ... are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness (Romans 8:9-10).

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 we can do good works. And this means that we can and should rely on the Holy Spirit to help us resist sin. The Holy Spirit also changes our hearts and minds so that we love God and desire his blessings. In short, he gives us the desire to live ethically. 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. In the Old Testament, he gave spiritual gifting only to special individuals, such as prophets, priests and kings. But the Old Testament 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 uttered through the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:16-17).

Joel prophesied of a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all believers, extending spiritual gifting to everyone he indwelt. 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 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:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

And in verse 11, he wrote:

All these [gifts] are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills (1 Corinthians 12:11).

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.

The spiritual gifts were given by God to the church for the common good that all believers may serve him, and that they may serve one another within the church, and they are brought together as a body. And therefore, that will mean that there is no spiritual gift that's inferior to the other, but all spiritual gifts are equally important in the kingdom of God for building the church and for helping us to serve God better together.

— Dr. Vuyani Sindo

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's the supernatural realm — the realm that is above nature. Although we often use this term to refer to anything that's 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's the natural realm. This is the world God created in Genesis 1, the world in which we live and operate. Without a doubt, it's the side of creation that's most familiar to human beings. And third, there's the preternatural realm, that realm that is beyond nature. It's not *above* nature in the way that God is, but rather it's *beside* nature as a distinct aspect of creation. This is the realm inhabited by invisible spirits such as angels and demons.

Our discussion of the facts of creation will divide into two parts. First, we'll look at the preternatural aspects of creation, considering how the spiritual realm, inhabited by angels and demons, relates to Christian ethics. And second, we'll 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'll consider the preternatural aspects of creation under two separate headings. First, we'll describe the inhabitants of the preternatural realm and their relationship to the natural world. And second, we'll 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 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 flawless, 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 angels who remained loyal to God, and it often refers to the fallen, rebellious angels as demons. Both angels and demons have influence over many things that happen in the natural world.

When we become aware of the spiritual realm, we realize that this is not just an impersonal force, but there is personal angelic and demonic forces, identities, that are at work in this, and it's not just some vague, mystical ... sort of thing. But there are fallen angels who are in opposition to the things of God, there are angelic beings who are representing him and messengers of God, and that is taking place in the spiritual realm. And so, an awareness of that is important as we pray and as we engage in the spiritual warfare.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

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

Angels. 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 185,000 Assyrian troops in one night 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 angels by asking this rhetorical question:

Are [angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to 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 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:

Through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (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 in our situation.

Demons. 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. But Scripture also indicates that demons can harm us in other ways. 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'll 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.

Humans often think of themselves as masters of the world, but in reality there are other manipulating forces behind them that they don't see. So often, when people think they are taking the initiative, they are actually being manipulated... Many people aren't even aware that they're being used. Still, no one can say that they are sinless just because they didn't know. Because when we cooperate with outside temptations, we are doing so in collusion with our selfish desires. And when our desires accept these outside influences, these temptations produce fruit.

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

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

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. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul wrote:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

Here Paul indicated that our enemies include the demonic rulers, authorities, powers and forces in the preternatural world. According to Scripture, spiritual warfare is a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. And 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:

[Jesus] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [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 aspects of creation in mind, we're ready to address the ethical implications of the natural, material world in which we live.

NATURAL

We'll focus our attention on the natural world as a whole, rather than on its details. First, we'll speak of the original condition of the natural world at creation. Second, we'll look at how humanity's fall into sin has impacted the natural world. And third, we'll discuss the implications that humanity's redemption from sin has for the natural world. Let's begin with the topic of creation.

Creation

Genesis 1 describes the creation of the entire natural realm in a way that emphasizes the central importance of humanity on the earth. From this account, we 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. These chapters also make 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 God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

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

Now that we've looked at the natural realm at the time of creation, let's turn our attention to humanity's fall into sin.

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 put the following curse on Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall

eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread (Genesis 3:17-19).

As a result of this curse, the natural world was affected by sin in many ways.

In Genesis 3 we have the description of Adam's sin, the impact upon creation, especially on the curse placed upon the ground... I think it works itself out in all types of ways. Why are there floods and droughts and famines and things like that? Why does creation not seem to cooperate with us? Why are there hurricanes and tornados and things like that? Well, there may be all types of natural causes that weathermen can trace, but they're talking about how, not why.

— Dr. John Hammett

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 originally was designed to be. Instead, 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, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

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

Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Nature is still good. It's still God's creation, and it is still a means God uses to minister to us and to bless us. 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 the natural world with regard to both creation and the fall into sin, we're ready to turn to the topic of redemption.

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 it 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:

We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are 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 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 read these words:

The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... [T]he creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory 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.

The Bible teaches ultimately that the creation itself will be affected by God's promises, that it's not just humans whom God is concerned about. It's his entire creation. So, as I read the Scripture, at least, God has plans for this actual world we live on. He created it. He's

concerned about it. He has a future for it. Exactly what that future will look like is hard to say. The Bible talks about a new heaven and a new earth, which I think is in some continuity with this present world but also is a transformed world, a redeemed world, a place where believers will live forever, enjoying the presence of God and Christ. I do think, therefore, that the future of what God is doing in the created world carries some implications for how we treat God's world now, that it is his creation, and we should work as his people at being very good stewards of the creation he has made and plans to redeem.

— Dr. Douglas Moo

Up to this point, we've identified the basic facts pertaining to God himself, as well as the facts of creation in general. Now, we're ready to consider the facts related to humanity, the pinnacle of God's creation.

HUMANITY

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

SOCIETY

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

Solidarity

There is a relationship that exists between all humanity, and I like to think of it as being we are our brothers' keepers, that we are in union, one with another, even though different races, what have you. But yet, thinking about, I guess, what Paul says about the body being many members, but yet, one body, in that regard there. And so, there is a brotherhood-sisterhood that exists among us as human beings.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

In our discussion of humanity's corporate solidarity, we'll speak of the cultural mandate as a corporate task that was given to humanity at creation. And we'll speak of the Fall as a corporate failure for the human race, that resulted in corporate consequences. Finally, we'll 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.

Corporate task. 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. Consider God's words to our first parents in Genesis 1:28:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion (Genesis 1:28).

Of course, God never intended Adam and Eve to have enough children by themselves 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 individuals is merely to do their 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 affect others, as well as how we can work together to expand 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.

Corporate failure. 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. In this 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've 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.

Corporate consequences. 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. This covenant required them to obey God, and it defined the consequences of their obedience or disobedience. But this covenant didn't 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:

One trespass led to condemnation for all men (Romans 5:18).

It is hard for all of us to understand how it can be fair for all human beings to be judged by something Adam did so many millennia ago. Yet, that's what Scripture seems pretty clearly to teach... First of all, there is the fact that according to Romans 5, we all really were with Adam when he sinned, so it's not just kind of an arbitrary fact in which God says, "Well, because Adam sinned I'm going to consider you sinned also." No, there was a sense in which we really were with him when he sinned so that his sin is our sin. Second, we have to remember as well, that all humans do, in fact, sin on their own. So, whether we attribute our sin and death ultimately to Adam or just realistically recognize that, yeah, I am a human being, have sinned and deserve death, we come out to the same place, in some ways, in the end.

— Dr. Douglas Moo

The only exception was Jesus. Jesus 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. In Romans 8:7-8, Paul wrote:

The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh 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 can't 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. 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.

Corporate reconstitution. In the modern world, it's common for Christians to focus on the individual aspects of salvation, such as forgiveness of sin, and eternal life for individual people. But as we've seen in prior lessons, God's plan for creation is not simply to save a host of individual believers. Rather, it's to build a kingdom. It's 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:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession (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're all aware that Jesus is our King and that we're 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.

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. Families, church congregations, even nations, are all part of the great kingdom that God is building on earth.

Now that we've explained the corporate solidarity of human society in our dealings with God, we should consider the commonality of our human experiences.

Commonality

Within the human race, we're 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 of 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. Of course, the commonalities that bind one group together are different from the commonalities that bind other groups together. These similarities and differences have to be taken into consideration when we make ethical decisions. We can see this idea in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22, where Paul wrote these words:

To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) ... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) ... I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).

Paul taught that it's 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 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're ready to consider the subject of community and our normal interactions with each other.

Community

Jesus came to establish a community that will be light and salt within the society. And light and salt cannot remain alone. Light has to spread out itself as a community to other people. When the body of Christ lives out that communal life in caring, in sharing, in living together in a way where [the] other has more priority than my own

needs and my own priorities, then I find that people will see witness to the love of Christ.

— Dr. Ashish Chrispal

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

Impact. 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 do 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'll 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. He wrote:

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members 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 this sense, the impact we have on each other is very broad. So, we must always take the whole church into consideration each time we make decisions. To the extent that we're able to determine how our actions will impact other believers, we must make decisions that will benefit others and not hurt them, and that will encourage 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 food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble (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 responsibilities we bear toward one another, especially toward one another in the church.

Responsibilities. Scripture teaches us about our responsibilities toward each other in many places. So, for the sake of illustration, we'll 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 John spoke about it in his first epistle. In 1 John 3:11-18, John wrote:

We should love one another... By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed 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've addressed humanity in the context of living with others in human society, we're ready to turn our attention to ourselves as individuals.

INDIVIDUALS

As we've seen, human beings have many things in common. We're all responsible to the same God, we live in the same natural world, and we're 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're faced with ethical choices.

We'll speak of four types of facts related to human beings as individuals. First, we'll speak of personal character. Second, we'll mention the significance of the experiences of each individual. Third, we'll address the matter of the human body and its influence. And fourth, we'll 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.

Every time I'm making a choice, especially in terms of ethical decisions, it is something that is inbuilt in me, or to say, my character, that is going to prompt that action... What I buy, or how I respect somebody else, or not respect somebody else, or how I take advantage

of a situation, which is an ethical question directly, helps to come from within, or originates within me, which is in my character or habits rather than in my brain, to make a decision.

— **Pastor Hiralal Solanki**

In addition to matters of personal character, we must also factor in the experiences of each individual when we're 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.

The same thing is true of our experiences. Our experiences might include such things as our heritage, our education, our opportunities, our status and position, and of course, everything we ever think, say or do. Most of our experiences are very common, but the combination and details of our experiences are unique to each person. 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're all tempted to steal. But the specific details of this temptation differ for each of us. And we're 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 heritage, 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 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 by caring for their physical needs. Each experience presents us with 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 age, our physical 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 one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers, except Caleb ... [and] Joshua ... And as for your little ones ... your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess 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 change 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 delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members... Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:18-24).

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.

The relationship between genetics and behavior is similar to the relationship between indwelling sin and behavior. 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.

When I want to act in a way that pleases God, then I still face this other question, "How can I?" because I find weakness in myself. Paul explores that in depth in Romans 7, describing the dilemma, the frustration of an individual who knows that God's law is right, agrees that it is good, but finds something else at work in himself and is frustrated. Romans 8, Paul gives the answer to that, that even though the law was weak, it could only give commands, but couldn't change our hearts. God, by the Holy Spirit, has now set us free, that we can obey through the death of Christ and through the power of the Spirit,

as we walk by the Spirit. The righteous requirement of the law is being fulfilled in us because we're walking, not according to the flesh — our own unaided human nature — but in the power of the Spirit.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Now that we've looked at individuals and the facts related to character, personal experiences, and the human body, we're 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, spouse, employee, friend, and many others as well. Beyond this, God has called people to different positions and jobs within the church. 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, according to Scripture, he expects us to use our gifts to minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Each of these roles presents us with particular temptations and responsibilities.

For instance, if we are ministers in the church, it's our responsibility to govern, teach and reprove God's people in a wise and godly fashion. But it would be wrong for a child in the church 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 members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

So, we can see that some people, specifically those in the role of family provider, have the responsibility to work to support others.

Correspondingly, when we're 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.

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. This is true both as members of society living with each other and as individuals living with ourselves.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've outlined the major categories of facts we must keep in mind in order to answer ethical questions in a biblical manner. We've identified a number of important facts about God himself, especially his authority, control and presence. We've described the facts that make up creation in general, looking at both the natural and preternatural realms. And we've 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.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GLOSSARY

angels – Intelligent, rational spirits with wills and personalities that are loyal to God and minister to man on God's behalf

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

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

cultural mandate – The command in Genesis 1:28 instructing humanity to develop and rule the creation to display God's glory

demons – Fallen angels that willfully rebelled against God and fell into condemnation; evil spirits that interact with the natural realm in order to tempt and harm human beings

ethical judgment – The application of God's Word to a situation by a person

ethics – The study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil

existential perspective – Ethical perspective that considers the person, the motives, and the inner leading of the Holy Spirit; one of the three perspectives on human knowledge used by theologian John Frame in his Tri-Perspectivalism; concerned with the response of the believing heart through emotion and feeling

natural realm – The realm of created existence in which we live, including the physical world and all its creatures

normative perspective – Ethical perspective that looks to God's Word as the norm or standard for making ethical decisions

open theism – Theological outlook that says the success of God's plans, purposes, and will are entirely dependent on history, especially on the choices that spirits and human beings make

preternatural – The realm of existence that is beyond or beside nature; includes invisible spirits such as angels and demons

sanctification – The act of making people and things holy

situational perspective – Approach to ethics with an emphasis on the situation and how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions

sovereignty – Theological term that refers to God's continuing rule and complete authority over all creation

supernatural – That which is above nature; refers specifically to God and his actions