

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 1

Ethics in Scripture

Manuscript



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Lesson One

Ethics in Scripture

INTRODUCTION

I think every Christian would agree that ethics is in crisis in our day, not only in the world out there, among unbelievers, but also in the church. Unbelievers go in a million directions trying to figure out the difference between right and wrong. Even well-meaning Christians are all over the map when it comes to ethical and moral living. I've met some Christians who seem to have very few moral convictions at all, and I've met other Christians who seem to have simple answers to every ethical question. I guess the older I get, the more I'm convinced that one of our greatest needs today is a way to understand how Scriptures apply to our lives, how we should think, act and feel, a way to make biblical decisions.

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

DEFINITION

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

the study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil.

This definition will suffice as a basic orientation toward ethics. But in these lessons, we aren't as interested in the broad study of ethics as we are in the particularly Christian or biblical view of ethics. So, we'll work with a definition that is a bit narrower than the study of moral right and wrong. We'll define Christian ethics as:

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

In order to understand the significance of our outlook on Christian ethics, we'll look at three aspects of this definition. First, we'll notice how it draws attention to God and his blessings. Second, we'll see the breadth of issues that are included in Christian ethics. And third, we'll take note of the depth of issues — how Christian ethics goes beyond mere actions. Consider first how our definition focuses on ethics as a matter of God and his blessings.

GOD AND BLESSINGS

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

By focusing on God and his blessings in this way, we mean to say two things: first, God's divine nature is the standard of morality; and second, God's actions demonstrate the standard of morality. Let's look at these two ideas in a bit more detail. First, we affirm that God's own nature is the ultimate standard of right and wrong; good and evil.

Divine Nature

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

Goodness is not a standard to which God must conform. It is a part of his character. To say that God had to conform to anything would mean to say that he had to grow, develop, experience and learn more... But for the Lord, it is his character. It is just his natural being. It's a part of his being, and so he doesn't have to grow or develop or mature. It is just who he is, as with all of his attributes, if you will. And so, again, it's a part of his character.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

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

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

This metaphor of God as light is primarily a moral evaluation. Darkness is equated with sin and lies, and light with truth and purity. It is a picture of God as perfectly free from sin in his very nature. And it is a description of sin as that which is foreign to God's nature. In light of this passage and others like it, we are obligated to see God's nature as the standard and model of goodness and rightness. And for the same reasons, we are compelled to condemn as sinful, evil and wrong those things that oppose his nature.

With our focus on God and his blessings, we mean to say not only that God's nature is the standard for right and wrong, but also that God's divine actions demonstrate the standard of morality.

Actions

One of the chief ways God shows his approval for what is right and good by bestowing blessings. Similarly, he shows his hatred for what is wrong and evil by withholding blessings and pouring out curses. We see this principle in action countless times throughout the Bible. For example, in Leviticus 26:3, in explaining the terms of his covenant to Israel, God offered to bestow tremendous blessings on them on the condition that they would:

Walk in [his] statutes and observe [his] commandments (Leviticus 26:3).

But later in the same chapter, he threatened horrible curses on them if they did not obey his every word. Listen to the way he introduced these curses in Leviticus 26:14-16:

If you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache (Leviticus 26:14-16).

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

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

Of course, we must also remember that God’s blessings and curses may not come in the ways we expect. Sometimes, there are no immediate consequences for our actions. And sometimes, what look like negative consequences can actually lead to blessings.

It’d be a terrible mistake to think that God always reacts immediately or quickly to human choices. Over and over again in the Scriptures, God is patient toward people who rebel against him. And it’s a good thing that he is. And also, throughout the Bible, God often delays pouring out blessings when people do the right thing. And there’s another thing we always have to keep in mind that ... what may appear to be a curse from our limited and sinful human outlooks may actually be a prelude to God’s blessing. And what may appear to be a blessing to us often turns out to be a prelude to curses. There are all kinds of complications like this ... in the Bible stories and records of real life. But one thing is certain in all of those complexities: At the great day of judgment when Jesus returns in glory, God’s displeasure with unethical living will be made fully evident, and his approval of ethical living will be made utterly clear as well. On that great day the curses and blessings of God will display for all eternity God’s disapproval and approval of the choices that human beings make.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

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

BREADTH OF ISSUES

It’s been common for ethics to be seen as a distinct collection of doctrines that deals with practical moral issues. Christian ethics is often taught as if it is just one of many theological disciplines. In this model, much of theology can be done with little to no concern for ethics. As a result, teachers of ethics frequently deal only with very small portions of theology and life.

By contrast, our definition stresses that Christian ethics touches every dimension of the Christian life. Ethics is “theology viewed as a means of determining” what is good and evil. In one way or another, every theological discipline and subject deals with ethics. Every discipline of theology obligates us to believe certain facts, to do certain things, and to feel certain emotions. And because it’s right to believe, to do, and to feel these things, and wrong not to, all theology involves the study of right and wrong. All theology involves ethics. Beyond this, Christian ethics touches on every area of life. Theology itself is not restricted to a small area of life. In fact, “theology” can be defined as:

the application of the Word of God to all of life

In other words, theology is not just reflection on God and his Word. Rather, it is reflection that carries through to application. Nothing stands outside of God's moral standards. Consider this approach to ethics and theology in light of 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).

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

In addition to focusing on God and his blessings and the breadth of issues in the subject of ethics, our definition addresses the depth of issues involved in Christian ethics. Christian ethics involves not only behavior, as is common in many ethical systems, but also the attitudes and natures of individual persons.

DEPTH OF ISSUES

Our definition of Christian ethics highlights "which persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not." God's moral standards hold us accountable in our actions, in the thoughts and inclinations of our hearts, and in our very natures.

Now, we can say with certainty that the Bible emphasizes good behavior. And it's generally obvious to most people that actions can properly be considered right and wrong. So, we won't spend much time explaining the reason for including acts in this definition. But we must also remember that Scripture views *attitudes* as morally right or wrong. Scripture demonstrates time and again that, rather than being amoral — neither good nor evil — our thoughts and emotions may be confirmed as morally right or denounced as morally wrong. The Bible teaches Christians to conform every aspect of our lives and beings to God's moral standards. So, Christian ethics must address not only behavior, but also emotions, orientations, predilections, inclinations, preferences, thoughts, imaginations, beliefs, and even our very natures. For example, in Matthew 5:22, Jesus taught that:

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

And in Matthew 5:28 he added that:

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

In both of these examples, Jesus condemned as sinful the emotions and attitudes of the heart, whether or not they eventually motivated the person to action. In fact, he

taught that these attitudes actually violate the same commandments that forbid the sinful actions. And consider his description of the human heart in Mark 7:21-23:

For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within (Mark 7:21-23).

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

It's fascinating that as early as Genesis 6:5, we're told that the very imaginations of the thoughts of our hearts — and "heart" being the core of the personality — is "only evil continually." That means, in fact, that we humans are controlled by a selfish desire for accomplishment, achievement, possession, and that thing warps everything we do. You cannot understand human behavior if you assume that humans are naturally good. In fact, as you look at the history of the race, you have to say, no, we're not naturally good, we're naturally evilly self-centered.

— Dr. John Oswalt

Following Scripture, we'll also speak of morally good and evil *persons*. Evil actions flow from an evil heart; an evil heart flows from an evil nature. For this reason, if we are to please God, it is not enough that our actions and attitudes be morally good. We must also be intrinsically good persons; we must have good natures. Scripture addresses this aspect of our being in Romans 8:5-9 where Paul wrote:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit... For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot... You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you (Romans 8:5-9).

In short, all unbelievers "live according to the flesh." Their natures are evil, and therefore, their actions and attitudes are also evil. Paul identified the fallen nature as being the source of a mind that is hostile to God and that does not, and cannot, submit to God's law. In distinction from unbelievers, believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And when Paul wrote of those who live "according to the Spirit," he referred to the new natures believers have because the Holy Spirit indwells them. This means that believers have an antidote for the fallen nature, and possess the ability to conform to God's standard of ethics.

So, when we speak of Christian ethics as "theology viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not," we mean at least three things: First, God himself is the standard of ethics; he

alone is the rule by which all right and wrong are measured. Second, all theology, even all of life, has ethical dimensions. Third, God's moral standards hold us accountable in our actions, in the thoughts and inclinations of our hearts, and in our very natures.

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

THREEFOLD CRITERIA

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

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

From the outset, we see here that the *Westminster Confession* rightly admits that there is a sense in which unbelievers do things which God commands. More than this, it also acknowledges that unbelievers' actions can produce good and beneficial results for themselves and for others. In other words, in one sense, unbelievers can do things that resemble our definition of ethical living, actions that bring about the blessing of God.

Unbelievers, even in their fallenness prior to regeneration by faith, they're still persons who bear the image of God... There is something in each person by the created grace through which God established his world that they cannot escape. There is a sense of "oughtness" that every person has. Some people respond more readily to that oughtness in their lives even when they're unbelievers. But it's not due to themselves, it's due to the created grace of the image of God that we cannot utterly erase from our lives.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

On this matter, Scripture agrees. For example, in Matthew 7:9-11, the Lord spoke these words:

Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

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

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

Humanity's fall into sin completely affected our ability to please God. Before the Fall, everything that Adam did — this is interesting to think about — everything that Adam did was pleasing to God, except eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But once that sin was committed and once our lives were affected in our heart, mind, soul, entire being, everything that we do now is sinful. And so, not even the righteous actions that we take, or what we would call righteous actions, are free of sin.

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

Even though we can applaud unbelievers when they outwardly conform to God's commands, we have to remember that they are not truly virtuous. They are not good enough to please God, or to earn the blessing of salvation. But, why is this? How can actions that outwardly conform to God's commands still be sinful?

As we'll see, when we speak of the threefold criteria for determining that which is good, obedience to God's commands first must be done with the proper motive. Second, our good works must be done according to the proper standard, the manner prescribed in God's Word. And third, for our works to be considered good, they must be done with the proper goal in mind, namely, to glorify God. In short, unless a work is done with the right motive, in conformity to the right standard, and for the right goal, it is not a work that God will reward with blessings. Let's take a closer look at the proper motive for obeying God.

PROPER MOTIVE

For a work to be done with the proper motive, it must proceed from a heart that is purified by faith. And it also must flow out of Christian love. Let's first consider what it means for our actions to be purified by faith.

Faith

In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Works [that] ... proceed not from a heart purified by faith ... are ... sinful, and cannot please God.” This criterion of the right motive is closely associated with the way our definition of Christian ethics focuses on good persons with good natures.

As we’ve already said, only believers, who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, can do actions that God rewards with blessings. One reason for this is that only believers have hearts that are purified by faith. This God-given, saving faith, that remains and grows within believers, is the means of purification through which believers receive new and good natures. And it properly motivates believers to do good works. As James wrote in 2:14-17:

What good is it ... if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... [F]aith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

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

There are two ways for people to be measured in the world. One is what we would call the righteousness of the law. So, if you abide by the law, if you pay your taxes, if you stop at stop signs, if you do what you’re supposed to do with respect to your family, friends, your work, all those kinds of things, people say, “Yes, he’s a law-abiding citizen. He’s righteous. The man’s righteous. He does good work.” But that kind of righteousness has no standing before God, as such, with respect to salvation. The other kind of righteousness, the other way that we’re looked at, is by the righteousness of faith. It’s this faith which, when appropriated by the heart, changes an individual and transforms him, actually becomes the driving and motivating force for a new kind of life, a life which is connected with God in his salvific power, and connected with a neighbor in terms of caring for one another.

— Dr. Gordon L. Isaac

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

Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

Unless our attempts to seek God’s blessings are founded on faith, we cannot please God, and therefore, cannot be rewarded by him. In other words, without faith as

one of our motives, we cannot do good works. Paul's statement of this doctrine in Romans 14:23 is perhaps the clearest and most succinct in all of Scripture. He wrote:

Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

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

Doing the right thing with the wrong motives is still sin if we understand sin in the way in which the Bible speaks of it, because sin in the Bible is not primarily a matter of wrong actions, it's a matter of a wrong attitude to God. It was Jonathan Edwards who once said that even at our best we are incapable of selfless acts. We are utterly self-promoting. We are instinctively rebellious against God and anti-authoritarian. So, even if we were to do a perfect act ... we would spoil it immediately by patting ourselves on the back and congratulating ourselves. So, unfortunately, the bad news for people like us is that every thought, every action is infected with selfishness. So, that means not only ... are we incapable of doing truly good acts, but even if our acts might be judged objectively by other people as good, if we scratch below the surface, we'll find that they are steeped in self-interest and a disregard for God unless he is the one who is actually enabling us to act in a way which pleases him.

— Dr. J. Gary Millar

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

Love

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

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

Works, and even spiritual gifts, that produce beneficial results merit no reward if they are not motivated by love. And, as we've already seen, things that do not merit reward are not good in God's eyes. We see this concern also in Matthew 22:37-40 in the way that Jesus summarized God's revelation in Scripture:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

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

Love is an aspect of every law God requires us to obey. So, only by acting in love, can the work we do conform to his standard. What's more, to meet God's standard, our love must be for both God and neighbor. Unbelievers do not love God; they are hostile to him. And, as a result, they can never be motivated by love for God. In other words, they can never have the right motive. And because of this, they can never do anything that God considers, in an ultimate sense, to be good.

Besides pointing out that good works must flow from the proper motive, our threefold criteria for determining what is good also requires that good works conform to the proper standard.

PROPER STANDARD

Listen again to some of the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 16, section 7:

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

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

To introduce our approach to the proper standard, we'll touch on three aspects of God's revelation: first, the commands of God in Scripture; second, *all* of Scripture; and third, general revelation. In the first place, for our works to meet the proper standard of what is good, they must adhere to all the commands or laws of God.

Commands

Listen to how John summarized this idea in 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

Notice what John did *not* say: He did not simply teach that everyone who practices lawlessness commits sin, as if lawlessness were just one of many kinds of sin. Instead, he said that every sin amounts to lawlessness — a rejection of God’s commands. John’s words here are categorical and put the importance of the proper standard for ethics in the strongest terms possible. But today, even many Christians think it’s possible that some violations of God’s law are not sinful. They think that certain commands revealed in Scripture may be ignored. James addressed this issue in 2:9-10 of his letter when he said this:

If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (James 2:9-10).

Clearly, some violations of the law are sinful, such as showing partiality, which James mentioned here. But James then went on to say that to violate *any* command is to violate the entire ethical system of Scripture.

God’s laws in Scripture form a unified whole that reflects his character and nature. So, to transgress any command is, in some senses, to transgress every command and to turn against God himself.

We’ll look into this matter more deeply in future lessons, but from the outset we must make a firm distinction here between God’s commands and their application. From a biblical perspective, we are never to ignore the commands of God. But the process of *application* is complex. It’s so complex that obedience to God’s commands must always consider the persons involved and the situations they face. Obedience in one situation may look very different from obedience in another situation. Still, as followers of Christ, we must never advocate secular relativism.

Secular relativism assumes that everything is relative; there is not absolute truth. What happens with that notion is that that is almost a impossibility, because if there is not absolute truth, you cannot make an absolute statement. Another issue is that you do not have absolute moral standards, so I can never say one is good.

— Rev. Aris Sanchez

Biblical truth does not change relative to our various cultural norms. And Christian ethics are never just a matter of our individual opinions. The truth is, God’s Word is always our binding ethical norm, and we must never violate it. So, all good works must conform to the standard of God’s commands in Scripture.

We know there is something such as right and wrong. Everyone knows that, even people in the secular world. And even if they say it’s relative to decide about right and wrong, they know there’s something such as what ought to be and what not ought to be... And even from very small, even if we’re sinful people, the children know — “Hey,

that's not right. You cannot do that to me." And that's part of us. And that's why relativism do[es] not work. We need a solid foundation. And it's not only a solid foundation that say[s] "Okay, there's something outside our self that give us a foundation," but the foundation actually must be coming from he who created us in a certain way.

— Rev. Dr. Henk Stoker

In the second place, the proper standard not only requires conformity to God's commands in his law, but also submission to *all* Scripture.

All Scripture

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* doesn't just say that God's *commands are* a standard of good works, but that God's Word *as a whole* is a standard of good works. That is to say, good works must be done according to the teaching of *all* of God's revelation, including those portions of Scripture that are not formally part of the law. Consider, for instance, that the law itself appeals to other portions of Scripture as the basis for its commands. As just one example, the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:9-11, appeals to the account of creation as the basis of its authority. There we read:

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:9-11).

Here, the Ten Commandments themselves establish their binding moral authority on the moral implications of the creation account. Jesus did something similar when he defended the disciples' so-called "Sabbath breaking" on the basis of David's behavior. Listen to the way he responded to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:3-4:

Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? (Matthew 12:3-4).

Jesus approved of David's actions, and drew a moral application from them. And he did this even though the account of this event was not part of the legal code. So, we see that in the Bible, both the law and other portions of Scripture are treated as the standard for good works. But this should not seem strange to us. After all, earlier in this lesson we read 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).

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

In the third place, God's word is broader than just his commands, and even broader than all of Scripture. In a very important sense, God's revelation in creation itself — commonly called “general revelation”— is also part of the proper standard for good works.

General Revelation

One of the clearest places we find this idea in Scripture is Romans 1:20. There Paul wrote:

For [God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So [people] are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

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

When we think of why people are condemned, it's actually not because they haven't heard the gospel; it's because they reject God. Romans 1 tells us that God's invisible attributes, his divine power, his divine nature, they've been seen since the creation of the world, and yet we reject it. And so — and this is a really important phrase here — so, “they are without excuse.” That means human beings; we are without excuse. When you stand before the Lord God, there will be nothing that could be said, there's no argument that can be said, no evidence that can be brought in that would say, “Well, I have an excuse for why I rejected you.” The Bible says it's on that basis that people are condemned and judged. So, there's no one in hell really with an alibi and the ability to say, “Yes, this is unfair, and I had a good excuse.” The Bible says we are without excuse.

— Rev. Vermon Pierre

The point is this: People's actions are condemned because they violate the standards revealed by God's general revelation. Or, to put it in the terms we've been using, general revelation is part of God's word, and part of the criterion to which good works must conform. So, to recap what we've said, Scripture teaches that good works

must conform to God's word as it is revealed in the commands of God's law, in all of Scripture, and in creation.

As we've seen, our threefold criteria for determining what God blesses includes being properly motivated and conforming to the standard of God's word. Now let's look at how all good works must be done with the proper goal in mind.

PROPER GOAL

Now, good works may have any number of immediate goals. For instance, when parents earn money to pay for food, shelter, and clothing, their immediate goal is to support themselves and their families. This is a good and admirable goal. But in our study of ethics, we are more interested in the *ultimate* goal of the works that people do. If our works are to please God, immediate goals like caring for our families, honoring our parents, going to church, and the like, must be part of a bigger picture. We must do these things because, at our core, we want to glorify God by living in a way that pleases him.

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

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Paul understood that some immediate goals might make it good to eat, while different immediate goals might make it good to abstain from eating. His point was that there ought to be another principle overriding these immediate goals, namely a concern for God's glory. Unless this ultimate goal was in sight, neither eating nor abstaining could be considered good. Peter made a similar point in 1 Peter 4:11 when he instructed his readers concerning the use of spiritual gifts. Listen to his words there:

Whoever speaks, [should speak] as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified (1 Peter 4:11).

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

When we look at life from God's perspective, we need to realize that our life is created to bring glory and honor to God... When we make moral decisions, many times we try to see what benefits me, or benefits the immediate people around me, rather than thinking about what is the ultimate reason for making a moral decision. And

therefore, I believe that we need to recognize that it is God who has set standards for our decisions. And when we try to recognize that our goal has to be pleasing God, bringing glory to him, [it] makes our moral decision, even if it entails, sometimes, difficult times, suffering, it still becomes much more important, because ultimately, we find meaning in the decisions we have made.

— Dr. Ashish Chrispal

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

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever (Romans 11:36).

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

Romans 11 suggests that God is ultimately glorified in everything that exists, whether by creating it, sustaining it, governing it, empowering it, or receiving it as service in his honor. It should be no surprise, then, that he approves of works intended to bring him glory, and that he condemns works that disregard or oppose his glory. God rewards and approves only those works that have his glory as their ultimate goal.

Now that we’ve established a biblical definition of Christian ethics and examined the threefold scriptural criteria for good works, we should apply these ideas by laying out the threefold process by which Christians should make ethical decisions. Throughout these lessons, we’ll examine the practical steps that we should take when making ethical decisions. At this point, however, we’ll simply sketch the basic contours of the approach that we’ll explain more fully in later lessons.

THREEFOLD PROCESS

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

TENDENCIES

There are many different ways that believers try to make ethical choices in life, but they tend to fall into three main categories. Some emphasize Scripture, insisting that

actions are good if they obey the dictates of Scripture, but bad if they do not. Others emphasize the consequences of actions. These people insist that actions are good if they produce good outcomes, but bad if they produce bad outcomes. Still others emphasize our Christian conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit. These people insist that actions are good if they accord with these internal indicators and bad if they don't.

As we've seen, the Bible defines good works as those that are done by the proper standard, for the proper goal, and with the proper motive. And in fact, these three criteria for good works correspond to the emphases we've just mentioned. Those who make ethical decisions by emphasizing the dictates of Scripture are primarily focused on the proper standard. When faced with an ethical issue, their first question tends to be: What does God's Word say? Then there are those who think mainly of the consequences of their actions. These people are chiefly interested in the proper goal. They focus on the situation itself, asking questions like: What is the problem? What issues are involved? What outcomes will result from the possible solutions to this problem? Finally, those who emphasize conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit are primarily concerned with the proper motive. We might say that they look first at the fact that good works can only be done by good persons. When it comes to ethical judgments, they tend to ask questions like: What is my attitude? Do I have the maturity to make the right decision? Do I have the spiritual capacity to apply God's Word to the situation?

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

PERSPECTIVES

Throughout these lessons we'll speak of ethical judgments or decisions in this way: ethical judgment involves:

the application of God's Word to a situation by a person

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

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

Ethics must be approached in at least three different ways, or from three different perspectives. Ethics should be done from the perspective of God's Word, or the "normative perspective"; from the perspective of the situation, or the "situational perspective"; and from the perspective of the person, what we'll call the "existential perspective." Biblically, the insights of all of these perspectives are valuable. Therefore, the best approach is to do ethics from all three perspectives, and to let the insights from each perspective inform and influence the insights from the others.

We'll look at each of these three perspectives, starting with the situational perspective. Then, we'll consider the normative perspective. And lastly, we'll examine the existential perspective. We'll return to these perspectives many times in these lessons, but at this point, we'll just look at the basic idea of each outlook. To begin, when our ethical inquiries turn to the problems themselves, to the consequences of actions, or to goals, we are doing ethics from the situational perspective.

Situational

This approach may be called teleological because it focuses on the end or the result of actions. Approaching ethics from the situational perspective involves noting the relations of means to ends in God's economy, asking questions like: "What are the best means of achieving God's purposes?" It also includes appeals to moral behavior based on the prior example of God, Jesus, and other morally good characters in Scripture.

Scripture itself frequently adopts the situational perspective and encourages us to do the same when it appeals to God's sovereign, providential control of his creation to instruct us. This is particularly evident when it refers to the events of redemption or points to God, Jesus and others as models for our behavior. For example, in Romans 6:2-4, Paul argued that our death to sin and our burial with Christ took place in order that a specific end might be accomplished:

How can we who died to sin still live in it? ... We were buried therefore with [Christ] ... in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:2-4).

In order to show that we might live morally apart from sin, he did not focus on the commandments of God or on the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and consciences. Instead, he focused on the facts of the situation, including the events of redemption and the ends for which we were saved. Paul also closed Romans 6 with a situational perspective on ethics when he wrote these words in verses 20-22:

When you were slaves of sin ... what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Romans 6:20-22).

Paul encouraged his readers to live holy, moral lives, and to abstain from the sins they once committed. He argued that by living holy lives, they would obtain eternal life. He also argued on the basis of consequences, but this time, he focused on the reward that would be given in response to godly living. Peter also presented situational arguments for moral behavior. Listen to what he said in 1 Peter 2:21:

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

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

The ultimate standard of goodness in the Bible is God, and we have a living, breathing example of what it means to be perfect in Jesus Christ, and therefore all ethical decisions are made in the light of actually how would Jesus behave in these circumstances; how can we follow the model of living a perfect human life that Jesus has laid out for us?

— Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

As important as the situational perspective is for us, perhaps the most intuitive perspective for Christians is what we call the normative perspective.

Normative

“Normative” refers to the fact that God’s word is the norm or standard for ethics. We are doing ethics from the normative perspective when we look to the Bible to tell us what to do. For example, in 2 Kings 23:21, in restoring proper worship to Israel, King Josiah instructed his people to observe the Passover, saying:

Keep the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant (2 Kings 23:21).

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

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

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

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

Having now looked at the situational and normative perspectives, let's take a look at what we've called the existential perspective. This is ethics viewed from the perspective of the person.

Existential

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

Scripture affirms our consciences and the leading of the Holy Spirit as valid means to determine what is right and wrong. Along with the situational and the normative perspectives, the existential perspective is a necessary tool for us as we seek to make ethical judgments. One example of this approach to ethics can be found in 1 John 3:21, where the apostle John wrote:

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

His point was that as redeemed people, our hearts are in tune with God's character. And if God's love abides within us, we'll be able to intuit what is right and what is wrong. God moves within his people to bring them inward conviction of right and wrong. And when we acknowledge this aspect in doing ethics, we are using the existential perspective.

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

Paul says in Galatians 5:17 that "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for [they] are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things [that] you want to do" ... And what Paul says is that we who are in Christ

have received the Spirit, and that Spirit is at work against what Paul calls our flesh, which isn't our physical existence. It is who we are as fallen human beings who are in rebellion against God. Fallen man, fallen human beings are those who live without God and who live for themselves, who live in rebellion against God. That's what Paul is talking about when he talks about the flesh. So, when he talks about the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh, what he is saying is that the Holy Spirit is given to those who are in Christ in order to conquer our fallen nature and make us worshipers of God.

— Dr. Donald Cobb

Listen to Paul's teaching in Galatians 5:16:

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).

One legitimate way for believers to make ethical judgments is to heed the Spirit's inner prompting. When we do this, we are viewing right and wrong from the existential perspective. And in Romans 14:5, 14, 23, Paul placed so much emphasis on the existential perspective that he insisted that to violate our consciences was sin even though our consciences are not perfect. He wrote:

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind... I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean... But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith (Romans 14:5, 14, 23).

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

Interestingly, in the context of Romans 14, Paul argued that if the matter were viewed from simply the normative and situational perspectives, most believers would be inclined to eat this food. But he insisted that believers also consider the insights of the existential perspective, and that they not eat unless they could reach the same conclusions from all three perspectives.

Now that we've introduced the general tendencies Christians follow in making ethical decisions, and the situational, normative and existential perspectives they represent, we should spend some time looking at the interdependence of these three perspectives.

INTERDEPENDENCE

The three different perspectives from which we may approach ethics are not separate constituent parts. Rather, each perspective is the whole of ethics, viewed from one angle or another. Each perspective interacts with and depends on the others.

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

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

The same is true when we speak of the normative perspective. If we cannot apply the words of Scripture to our situations, and if they do not affect us on a personal level, we really have not understood Scripture. Consider the man who says, "I know what 'You shall not steal' means," but then embezzles funds from his employer. This person certainly does not have an adequate concept of the words "You shall not steal." Here, he claims to understand the normative requirements, but his failure to be able to comprehend a situational context in which these apply to him personally, demonstrates that, in reality, he has little clue what the Bible requires.

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've introduced the subject of ethics in Scripture by offering a definition of Christian ethics. We've also explained the Bible's threefold criteria for good works. And finally, we've suggested a threefold process for making ethical decisions that takes into account the normative, situational and existential perspectives.

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

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GLOSSARY

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

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 – Of or relating to existence and being

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

general revelation – God’s use of the natural world and its workings to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to all humanity

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

Passover – Jewish festival remembering when God delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt

relativism – A philosophical view that treats moral judgments as a matter of personal opinion relative to the changing norms of one’s culture, society or historical context without adhering to an absolute standard of right and wrong

Sabbath – Day of rest commanded by God in the Old Testament; *Shabbat* in Hebrew

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

special revelation – God’s disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means

teleological – Of or relating to the purpose or goal of something; concerned with outcomes as the basis for an action being considered good

theology – Any matter that refers directly to God or that describes subjects in relation to God

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647