

# Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON  
TEN

THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE:  
CHOOSING GOOD



THIRD MILLENNIUM  

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# Making Biblical Decisions

## Lesson Ten

### The Existential Perspective: Choosing Good

#### INTRODUCTION

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Have you ever thought about all the excuses people have for not doing the right thing? When children don't do their homework, or employees don't do their jobs, or friends don't keep their promises, what do they say? Maybe they lacked the information they needed, so their excuse is, "I didn't know." Or maybe they didn't understand the information they had, so they say, "I didn't know I was supposed to do it." Or maybe they simply preferred doing the wrong thing, so they admit, "I didn't want to do it." Well, the fact is that in order to do the right thing in the end, we ordinarily have to do many other things along the way. We have to get the right information, we have to assess it correctly, and we have to apply it in the right way.

This is the tenth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*. And we have entitled this lesson "The Existential Perspective: Choosing Good." In this lesson, we will explore how Christians actually make ethical decisions — how we go about choosing good. And we will pay particular attention to the ways our personal abilities and capacities contribute to these choices.

Throughout these lessons, we have been teaching that Ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. And we have been highlighting three elements of this model: God's Word, the situation, and the person.

When we approach ethics with a focus on God's Word, we are using the normative perspective. And when we pay attention to circumstances such as facts, goals and means, we are employing the situational perspective. Finally, when we concentrate on the persons involved in making ethical decisions, we are looking at matters from the existential perspective. Each of these perspectives contributes to ethical choices by giving us information about God, about our situation, and about ourselves. And all of them are closely interrelated. In this lesson, we will look once again at the existential perspective, this time focusing on the ways we use our personal faculties in the process of choosing to do good.

Human beings use a variety of capacities and abilities to make ethical decisions. In this lesson, we will refer to these abilities as our existential faculties. There are many ways to describe these faculties, but we will summarize them in terms of seven capacities and abilities: experience, imagination, reason, conscience, emotions, heart, and will. Now, there is a great deal of overlap between these existential faculties. They are all deeply interrelated and interdependent. Even so, each one functions in its own way, so it is helpful to look at the main roles each faculty plays in ethics.

In this lesson, we will group our existential faculties according to the main ways they ordinarily help us make ethical judgments. These groupings are somewhat artificial, because all our abilities and capacities are at work in every step along the way. But it is also true that we rely primarily on certain faculties to perform certain tasks, so these divisions can be helpful as we think about the process of making ethical choices.

As we explore the concept of choosing good, we will focus on the way our existential faculties function in three main stages of the decision-making process. First, we will look at the main faculties we use when we are acquiring knowledge of our situation, ourselves and God's Word. Second, we will consider the capacities and abilities we typically use in assessing or evaluating this knowledge. And third, we will focus on the ones we use when we are applying our knowledge by making ethical choices. Let's begin with the main faculties we employ when we are acquiring knowledge.

## ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE

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We will consider two of the most basic faculties that are critical to acquiring knowledge. First, we will consider how we rely on experience. And second, we will look at the ways our imagination contributes to our knowledge. Let's begin with the ways experience helps us acquire the knowledge we must have when making ethical decisions.

### EXPERIENCE

As obvious as it may seem, it is very important to remember in the study of ethics that human beings gain knowledge through many different types of experiences. We know people because we have the experience of seeing them, talking to them, and so on. We know what emotions feel like because we have experienced fear, love, anger, and the like. We know about some events directly because we live through them, experiencing them firsthand. We know about other events indirectly because we have had the experience of reading about them or of learning about them through some other medium. As we speak of experience in this lesson, we will have these and other kinds of experiences in mind.

To help us summarize all these different types of experiences, we will define experience as awareness of persons, objects and events. Each experience produces knowledge of some type, whether about God, the world around us, or ourselves. And this knowledge helps us discern good from evil.

As we consider experience in more detail, we will look in two directions. First, we will focus on our physical or sensory interactions with the world around us. And second, we will address our mental experiences, those experiences we have in our own minds. Let's begin with our physical interaction with the world around us.

### Physical

Our physical interaction with the world takes place through our sensory perception — our sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. These five senses represent the primary ways that we gain information about God, people, objects, our environment, and the many events that occur. For instance, we know about other people because we see

them, and talk to them, and touch them. We learn about events as we witness them, read about them, or hear reports about them. We learn about God's glory by reading his Word, listening to others talk about him, and observing the grandeur of his creation.

Of course, Scripture sometimes calls attention to the limitations of our senses. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:7, Paul wrote:

**We live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).**

As Paul indicated here, our senses are limited in their ability to give us knowledge about the future of our salvation. Yes, we use our sight to read God's Word, but it takes something more than sensory perception for us to be convinced that God's Word is true — it takes faith, belief in things that are beyond direct sensory experience.

But apart from these limitations, God has given us our senses as important tools for gaining knowledge. As a result, our senses tend to be reliable, teaching us true things about God, the creation around us, and ourselves. Now, we need to be aware that humanity's fall into sin has affected our sensory perceptions. Not only do illnesses and other abnormalities limit our physical abilities, but at times we also encounter illusions. Sometimes we think we hear or see or feel something that isn't really there. But in general, our senses are reliable. Consider John's words in 1 John 1:1-3:

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 John 1:1-3).**

John spoke of sight, hearing and touch as reliable senses that gave him and others true knowledge about Jesus. In the same way, those who read John's words use their senses to perceive John's words, to hear and to read his testimony, so that they too can have knowledge of the truth.

In a similar way, Psalm 34:8 encourages us with these words:

**Taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).**

As David taught here, the fact that we have food to eat is proof that God is good; it teaches us that he loves us and provides for us. And although we cannot see God physically, our awareness of his goodness can metaphorically be described as seeing, since it gives us knowledge about him. So, both our sense of taste and our experience of eating give us true knowledge about God.

It is also through our senses that we learn about God's norms as they are revealed through special and general revelation. It is through our physical senses that we learn about the many facts, goals, and means of our situations. And it is through our senses that we learn much about ourselves. Yes, we need to be careful to use our senses rightly. And we need to use the Scriptures and our other faculties to confirm the knowledge we gain

through our senses. But we must also recognize that our senses are generally reliable, God-given tools, and that the knowledge we gain through them is critical for Christian ethics.

Having considered physical interaction with the world as an important part of our experience, we are ready to speak of our mental experiences, those experiences that take place in our minds.

## Mental

Our senses provide us with information, but until that information enters our internal thought processes, our experiences do not result in knowledge. Now, from the outset we should acknowledge that throughout history the relationship between sense perceptions and mental concepts has been understood in many different ways. But for our purposes, we will illustrate the connection in a very simple way.

Consider the experience of seeing a cow. When I see the cow, my eye sends an image of it to my brain. This is the physical sensory experience of sight. But the experience of knowing that the animal is a cow is mental. My eyes do not tell my mind that the image is a cow. On the contrary, it is my mind that interprets the image as a cow. Only when my mind has experienced the image of the cow does my sight result in knowledge.

In a similar way, all of our mental experiences are vital to gaining knowledge. Self-reflection, introspection, emotions, memories, imaginings, plans for the future, wrestling with problems, awareness of God, conviction of sin — these are all internal activities that we experience.

Now, just like our physical experience, our mental experience is affected by sin. Sometimes we make mistakes in our thinking or believe we have experienced things that haven't really happened. So, we need to be careful to confirm our experiences with Scripture and our other faculties. But we must also recognize that the Holy Spirit uses our mental experiences to teach us true knowledge.

When we think of our mental experiences in this way, it is easy to see that the whole process of gaining knowledge can be assessed from the perspective of our mental experience. Whether our knowledge comes from reading books or from observing events, it ultimately resides in our minds. And for this reason, mental experience is critical for gaining and processing knowledge.

With this understanding of experience in mind, we are ready to turn to the second existential faculty we use to acquire knowledge, namely imagination. Imagination is sometimes thought to be an illegitimate way to pursue knowledge, as if it necessarily entails falsehood or even deceit. But as we will see, the Bible has many positive uses for imagination.

## IMAGINATION

In this lesson, we will use the term imagination simply to refer to our ability to form mental images of things that are beyond our experience. At first glance, it may seem

strange to think of imagination as a way of acquiring ethical knowledge. But as we will see, our imaginative abilities are vital to learning and thinking about God, the world, and ourselves.

We will explore the concept of imagination in three ways. First, we will speak of imagination as a form of creativity. Second, we will consider the ways imagination enables us to think about subjects that exist in different periods of time. And third, we will look at how imagination allows us to think about things that are separated from us by physical distance. We'll begin with the idea that imagination is a form of creativity.

## Creativity

A typical way to think about imagination as creativity is to consider the steps artists take when drawing pictures. They often begin by conceptualizing the drawings, by forming mental images of what the finished drawings will look like. When they begin to draw, they imagine the results of each stroke before they make it. If the stroke matches what they had in mind, they are often pleased. But if it does not match the picture in their minds, they may alter what they have drawn. This process of imagining and painting continues until the work is completed.

In a similar way, imagination is involved in everything we make or create. We use our imagination every day for simple acts of creativity, such as deciding what kind of food we will cook, or even deciding what to say in a conversation. And we use our imaginations in many other creative ways as well. Scientists use their imaginations to come up with theories, and ways of testing their theories. Inventors use their imagination to create new technologies and devices. Architects use their imaginations to design buildings and bridges. And teachers and preachers use their imaginations as they write lessons and sermons.

Listen to the account of this event in 2 Samuel 12:1-7:

**[Nathan] said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor... [T]he poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb ... He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him... [T]he rich man ... took the ewe lamb ... and prepared it for [his guest]." David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die!" ... Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:1-7).**

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Nathan created an imaginary ethical situation, an imaginary legal case. And he asked David to draw a moral conclusion from this imaginary situation. The success of Nathan's confrontation relied on his and David's ability to imagine creatively.

As this biblical example illustrates, imagination enables us to form and to recognize moral patterns and analogies. For instance, as we look through Scripture we find many specific examples of things that God has blessed and cursed, and we also find



many general principles that explain how God determines what to bless and what to curse. And understanding how these general principles relate to the specific examples is to some degree a matter of creative imagination. We create connections between the principles and examples, and we test these connections by imagining counter-examples. Then we imagine consistent ways to apply the same principles in our own lives.

Of course, once again we must remember that the corruption of sin can cause us to imagine all sorts of errors, so we have to use our other faculties to make sure that the conclusions of our imagination agree with God's Word. But we can still have a good degree of confidence in our imagination when we use it carefully and rightly, because the Holy Spirit gave us this faculty as a reliable tool for assessing ethical knowledge.

But in addition to using imagination for creativity, we can also use it to help us think about things that are separated from us by time — things that do not exist at the moment we are thinking about them.

## Time

Consider Jesus. He is no longer on earth teaching his twelve disciples. He is no longer dying on the cross, or rising from the dead, or ascending into heaven. So, in order to understand and apply Jesus' ministry to our ethical decisions, we have to use our ability to imagine the past.

For instance, the Bible requires us to pursue good goals, especially the glorification of God through the triumph of his kingdom. But this goal is in the future. We have to imagine it in order to pursue it. And we also have to use our imaginations to figure out the best means to use to reach this goal. In short, without our ability to imagine the future, we would not be able to apply God's Word to our lives.

Having looked at imagination in terms of creativity and time, we should turn to the way imagination helps us to think about things that are separated from us by distance. Just as things can be separated from us by time, they can also be separated from us by physical distance.

## Distance

For instance, very few of us have visited the island of Malta where the apostle Paul was shipwrecked on his journey to Rome. But the fact that we have never seen the island for ourselves does not mean that we cannot imagine it. In fact, to some degree when we read the biblical account of Paul's time on Malta in the book of Acts, we cannot avoid imagining it.

You see, when people and things are so distant from us that they are beyond the range of our senses, they are not currently part of our experience. And because they are not currently part of our experience, we have to use our imaginations to think about them. Of course, the information we receive about these distant things is fallible, and so are our thoughts about them. Therefore, we need to rely strongly on the Holy Spirit to help us evaluate our imagination according to God's Word and to harmonize it with our other

abilities and capacities. When used rightly, our imagination is extremely useful for thinking about things that are distant from us.

Consider the case of the apostle Paul during one of his periods of imprisonment. According to Philippians 2:25 and 4:18, when the Philippian church heard that Paul was in prison and in need, they sent a monetary gift to support him and a minister to take care of him. This was a good ethical choice. It took account of the facts, set a godly goal, and then devised the means to reach that goal.

But notice how greatly this process relied on imagination to span the distance between Paul and the Philippians. Paul was not present to the Philippians' experience, so they used their imagination to understand the facts of Paul's situation. Then they used their imagination to set the goal of changing Paul's circumstances in his distant prison. Finally, they imagined the means that would enable them to bridge the distance between themselves and Paul in order to reach their goal. In each step of this process, imagination enabled the Philippians to think about things that existed at some distance beyond their physical experience.

By now, it should be clear that the process of acquiring knowledge relies heavily on experience and imagination. Whether we are investigating the ethical dimensions of God's Word, our situation, or even ourselves, we usually gain our knowledge through these existential faculties.

Now that we have considered acquiring knowledge as a step in the process of choosing good, we are ready to turn to assessing knowledge, the step in which we evaluate the information we have received.

## ASSESSING KNOWLEDGE

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We will speak about some of the ways three particular existential faculties aid us in our task of assessing knowledge. First, we will mention reason or intellect, which is our most logical faculty. Second, we will address our conscience, our ability to recognize good and evil. And third, we will focus on our emotions as intuitive indicators of right and wrong. Let's begin with reason, the faculty by which we order our thoughts in a logical way.

### REASON

Unfortunately, Christians often go to extremes when they think about the role of reason in ethics. On the one side, some theological traditions give reason more attention than any of our other existential faculties. These theologians sometimes speak of the "primacy of the intellect" as if our reason were to be trusted above all other abilities and capacities. But we must always remember that to use reason rightly, we have to employ it in harmony with our other faculties. On the other side, some traditions go to the opposite extreme, at times even seeing reason as an enemy, as if using human intellect were to ignore the personal leading of the Holy Spirit. But the truth is that our intellect comes

from God, and that the Holy Spirit helps us use it rightly. Therefore, it has an important role to play in our decision-making process.

For our purposes, reason can be defined as the capacity to make logical inferences and to judge logical consistency. In a Christian context, right reasoning is the ability to think in coherent and orderly ways and to make judgments that accord with biblical patterns of thought.

Reason comes into play in many areas of the study of Christian ethics. But at this point in our lesson, we are most interested in how it enables us to make sense of our situation, both by helping us understand the facts and by enabling us to compare these facts to the norms revealed in God's Word.

As we have already seen, on a basic level, even the knowledge we acquire through our sensory experience requires a measure of reasoning. Every time sensory data is processed mentally, we are exercising reason to some degree.

Think once more about the way our eye sends the image of the cow to our brain. Our brain records the image, but it is our reason that recognizes the image as a cow. We assess the visible qualities of the image, compare the image to our existing knowledge, and determine that the image is a cow. This basic level of knowledge involves reason.

And on a more complex level, reason permits us to compare different facts to each other more extensively to determine their logical relations.

For instance, let's consider a very simple illustration of reasoning about two facts. On the one hand, we have the statement "David is sick." And on the other hand, we have the statement "God can heal the sick." The first statement declares the fact of David's poor health, and the second statement declares the fact of God's ability.

Reason tells us that David's sickness is a specific instance of the more general category of sickness. Perhaps he has the flu, or a cold, or pneumonia. Whatever it is, it is included in the broader category of sicknesses that God can heal. This allows us to draw a conclusion that is implied but not stated in the initial fact: God can heal David.

When we are challenged with making biblical decisions, we must apply similar reasoning to the facts of our situation, determining how they relate to one another.

Reason also helps us relate statements of fact to statements of duty. In this process we compare the facts of our situation to the requirements of God's norms. Consider the statements "David is sick" and "We should pray for the sick." "David is sick" is still a statement of fact, but "We should pray for the sick" is a statement of duty. It tells us what God requires of us. When we use moral reasoning to assess these statements, we can derive a specific ethical conclusion: We should pray for David.

Of course, there are many other ways we should reason in ethics. We use reason when we argue from the lesser to the greater, as Jesus did when he taught that since God feeds the birds, which have little value, he will also feed his people who have great value. We also use reason when we talk about events that are conditional, such as when God flooded the earth in Noah's day because humanity's sinful actions met the conditions necessary for its destruction. The list could go on and on.

Sadly, Christians sometimes believe that the Bible teaches us not to use reason in ethics. They think that somehow we are to turn off our logical capacities when we obey God. But nothing could be further from the truth. Scripture uses reason all the time, and it regularly calls on us to do the same. It constantly presents logical moral arguments. And because the Bible is infallible, its logic is a perfect model for our own ethical reasoning.

Of course, we always need to remember that sin's corrupting influence has even reached our ability to reason. As a result, fallen human reason can never be as perfect as the reasoning we find in Scripture. So, to gain confidence, we should confirm our conclusions with our other faculties, with other people, and especially with the Word of God. Moreover, as we said in the beginning of this section, we must rely on the power and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this in ways that please God. When we use reason in these ways, it is a very helpful tool for assessing the knowledge we have acquired.

With this understanding of reason in mind, we are ready to discuss the ways our conscience enables us to assess our ethical knowledge. How does the human conscience help us evaluate the information we acquire?

## CONSCIENCE

For our purposes in this lesson, we will define our conscience as our God-given ability to discern good and evil. It is the sense of conviction that our thoughts, words and deeds are either pleasing or offensive to God. Listen to the way 2 Corinthians 1:12 reveals Paul's reliance on his conscience:

**Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God (2 Corinthians 1:12).**

Paul and Timothy were convinced that they had behaved in ways that God approved. Their conscience approved their actions. In this case, their conscience gave them true affirmation that their behavior was pleasing to God.

In other cases, when we have sinned, our conscience can rightly condemn us as guilty and encourage us to repent. For instance, when King David sinfully took the census of his fighting men, his conscience condemned his actions and moved him to repent. Listen to the record of this in 2 Samuel 24:10:

**David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing" (2 Samuel 24:10).**

Here the word translated "conscience" is *lev*, which literally means "heart." But in this case the word "heart" refers to the concept of conscience, David's ability to distinguish good from evil.

In this sense, conscience enables us to assess the knowledge we have acquired, and to judge it against the standard of God's Word. It approves us when we believe we are acting in accord with God's Word, and it condemns us when we believe we are violating God's Word.

Like all our other existential abilities and capacities, our conscience has been corrupted by sin. Therefore, it is bound to make mistakes from time to time. It errs by

approving something that is actually sinful or by condemning something that is actually good. In either case, the result is that we misunderstand what God would have us do. For instance, listen to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8:8-11:

**Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you ... eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother ... is destroyed by your knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:8-11).**

Paul taught that it was acceptable for believers with strong, well-informed consciences to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. But if they had weak consciences and mistakenly believed that it was wrong to eat idol food, then it became sinful for them to eat it. And the reverse is also true. It is sinful to do things that God prohibits even if our consciences say that these things are good. Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 4:4:

**My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Corinthians 4:4).**

Paul's conscience was clear because he believed that he had done the right thing. But he knew that having a clear or good conscience was not enough, because our consciences can make mistakes.

Not surprisingly, the solution to sin's corrupting influence is to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit who works within us as we strive to conform our conscience to God's Word. As he helps us harmonize our existential faculties, we can correct our conscience when it falls into error, and affirm it when it judges rightly.

Now that we have spoken about reason and conscience, we are ready to focus on the ways we use our emotions in assessing knowledge. Unfortunately, many Christians believe that emotions should have nothing to do with making biblical decisions, but as we will see, the Scriptures insist that emotions have a very important role to play.

## EMOTIONS

Emotions are inner feelings; they are the affective aspects of our ethical sensitivity. The Bible doesn't tend to speak about emotions abstractly or as a group. But it talks a great deal about individual emotions, such as love, hate, anger, fear, joy, sorrow, anxiety, contentment, and the like. So, to see the ways we use emotions to assess knowledge, we will look at how several particular emotions can help us interpret the world around us.

Emotions are God-given human abilities that enable us to assess our knowledge in many different ways. For instance, we often have emotional responses to situations even before we engage in any conscious, rational reflection. In these cases, our emotions provide our initial orientation toward the facts. They are immediate assessments of our

circumstances. For instance, if I am crossing the street and hear a loud car horn behind me, my first response will probably be an emotional one, such as fear or surprise. And only after conscious reflection will I be able to explain that I was afraid because I felt I might be in danger.

In cases like this, it is possible to say that emotions are based on some subconscious form of reasoning. I know that car horns often alert me to danger. So, when I hear a horn, I may react reflexively with the emotion of fear. But it is hard to identify any thoughtful, rational process in such a reflex. To all appearances, it happens too quickly for me to engage in an active, conscious reasoning.

Instead, it appears that my emotion is my first reaction to the experience, and that my thoughtful consideration of the event comes later. And the same thing is true in many other ethical situations. Our emotions are often our initial interpretation of the facts.

Listen to the record of Daniel's encounter with an angel in Daniel 10:8-17:

**I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless... I said to the one standing before me, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe" (Daniel 10:8-17).**

The shock, terror and anguish of seeing this heavenly being paralyzed Daniel with fear. He felt his emotions *intensely* before he was able to think rationally about the vision. And his powerful emotional experience influenced his response to the vision, motivating him to submit to the angel's message from God.

Or think once more about the way King David responded to the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then had her husband Uriah killed to cover up the adultery. But he had never felt sorrow and contrition over his sin, and so he had never repented. His lack of these emotions prevented him from thinking rightly about his sin, blinding him to its severity and thereby keeping him from repenting.

In response to David's hard-heartedness, God sent Nathan to tell David a parable about a rich man who had stolen a poor man's pet sheep and fed it to his guests. David, of course, had been a shepherd himself, and this story stirred his emotions. His emotions enabled him to see the injustice in the situation, and he was outraged by the rich man's lack of pity. Then Nathan revealed the truth: the parable was a metaphor for David's own actions. David was the rich man who had stolen Bathsheba from poor Uriah. David had known the facts of his actions for a long time. But he was able to see his sin clearly only when he used his emotions to measure these facts against God's standard.

Our emotions can be very useful tools for determining how God's Word applies to our modern lives. Feelings of compassion can help us see the importance of helping those in need. The stirring of anger can persuade us of the value of pursuing justice. Experiences of joy can enable us to see and affirm God's goodness even in the midst of difficult times. Fear can cause us to search for ways to avoid sin. Feelings of guilt can alert us to times we have fallen into sin. Feelings of love can teach us how to provide, and protect, and admonish, and show mercy.

Of course, like the rest of our existential faculties, our emotions are corrupted by sin and therefore subject to error. This is why we should counsel people not to follow their emotions blindly, without reflection. Not every feeling we have is righteous, or even accurate. Our emotions reveal the whole range of our hearts, including our sins and misunderstandings. So, we must always be careful to submit them to the leading of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of God's Word, and to harmonize them with our other God-given abilities and capacities.

In summary, whenever we think about how facts relate to one another, or about how they relate to our duty before God, we are assessing the knowledge we have acquired. And in these assessments reason, conscience, and emotions are all valuable tools that can help us reach conclusions that are pleasing to God.

So far in our investigation of choosing good, we have looked at some of the existential faculties we rely on most when we are acquiring knowledge about our situation, as well as the main faculties we rely on when we are assessing this knowledge. Now we are ready to turn to the third step in the process of choosing good: applying knowledge. In this section of our lesson, we will focus on the abilities and capacities most directly related to the act of deciding.

## APPLYING KNOWLEDGE

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Once we rightly understand ourselves, our situation, and God's Word, we are finally in a position to make an ethical decision. It is not enough simply to figure out what we *ought* to do. We actually have to decide to *do* it. We have to make a conscious choice to do the right thing, and we have to follow through with that choice. And that's what we have in mind here when we talk about applying knowledge. We are talking about decisions that result in action.

Our discussion of applying knowledge will focus on two faculties. First, we will speak of the more general faculty of the heart. And second, we will speak of the more specific faculty of the will. Let's begin with the heart as the more general of these two.

### HEART

As we have seen in a prior lesson, our heart is the center of our entire being. It is the depth of our inner person and the seat of our motives — the sum of all our inward dispositions. In the vocabulary of the Bible, there is a great deal of overlap between the words "heart," "mind," "thoughts," "spirit" and "soul."

For our purposes in this lesson, however, we want to focus on our heart's function in the decision-making process. So, we will define the heart as the seat of moral knowledge and moral will. It is our whole inner person considered from the perspective of what we know and what we do with our knowledge.

We will look at two aspects of the heart in order to see how it functions when we make ethical decisions. First, we will investigate our heartfelt commitments, our basic

loyalties. Second, we will explore our heart's desires, those things we want when we make a decision. We'll begin with the commitments of our hearts.

## Commitments

We have many commitments in life. We are loyal to various people, such as our families, friends, coworkers, and fellow Christians. We are committed to organizations, such as churches, schools, companies, governments, and even sports teams. We are committed to principles, such as goodness, honesty, truth, beauty and wisdom. We are loyal to certain lifestyles, certain patterns of behavior, and preferences for all kinds of things. And as strange as it may sound, because we are fallen human beings, there is a sense in which we even have commitments to sin.

Now, of course, we are not committed to all of these things to the same degree. And for the Christian, one commitment should stand above all others — our commitment to God. This commitment should govern the fundamental direction of our entire life, and all our other commitments should serve this most basic one. As Solomon proclaimed in 1 Kings 8:61:

**Your hearts must be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands (1 Kings 8:61).**

And as the prophet Hanani taught in 2 Chronicles 16:9:

**The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him (2 Chronicles 16:9).**

Commitments are important in ethics because there is a sense in which they govern all our choices. To be more specific, we choose according to the commitments that we feel most greatly at the moment that we choose. When our righteous commitments are the strongest, we act according to our heartfelt loyalty to God, and he judges our behavior to be good. But when we give in to our sinful commitments, God judges our behavior to be evil. As Jesus said in Luke 6:45:

**The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).**

Here, Jesus referred to our commitments as the things that are stored up in our hearts. And our commitments always express themselves in our works. So, we express our commitment to God in good works, and we express our commitment to sin in evil works.

Because sin still dwells in us, every Christian has mixed commitments. Some of our commitments are good, being part of our larger commitment to God, but some of our commitments are evil, being the result of the sin in our hearts. So, as we work toward making biblical decisions, we have to be very aware of our commitments. We submit to



the Holy Spirit as he works within us to conform all our commitments to God's character, both through our understanding of his Word, and through the input of our other faculties. And we must reject and attempt to change those commitments that flow from sin.

With this understanding of our commitments and loyalties in mind, we are ready to think about our desires. How do our wants and longings impact our moral choices?

## Desires

Scripture indicates that just as Christians have mixed commitments, we also have both good and bad desires in our hearts. When we set our hearts on things that God approves, our desires are good. But when we set our hearts on things he condemns, our desires are evil. For instance, in 2 Timothy 2:20-22 Paul gave this instruction:

**In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Timothy 2:20-22).**

Paul taught that we are to purify our hearts by getting rid of our evil desires, our longings that are motivated by indwelling sin. As we purge the evil desires from our hearts, we will be left with only those desires that please the Lord.

Purifying our hearts is not easy; sin puts up a strong fight. In fact, this battle is so difficult that we can never win it by our own strength. Only by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit can we hope to win this struggle. But because we are imperfect people, we are certain to fail even to rely on the Spirit as we should. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 5:17:

**For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want (Galatians 5:17).**

And in Romans 7:15-18 he wrote this:

**What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... [I]t is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out (Romans 7:15-18).**

In these verses Paul contrasted our good and evil desires. On the one hand, we have spiritual desires, desires that the Holy Spirit gives us and that are pleasing to God. On the other hand, we have sinful desires that come from our fallen, sinful nature. And these two desires battle for dominance every time we make a decision. When we give in to our sinful desires, our choices are evil. But when we resist those sinful desires and act

on our spiritual desires, our choices are good. And there is no other option. There are only two kinds of decisions: good and evil. Every good decision is made according to desires from the Holy Spirit, and every evil decision is made according to sinful desires.

In the Christian life our greatest desire should always be to please God, to do his will. We hate the fact that we desire sin. Considered from the perspective of our lives as a whole, our sinful choices contradict our desires. We choose to sin even though we don't desire to sin.

But considered from the moment of our decision, our choices never contradict our desires. From this perspective, we always choose what we desire most at the moment that we decide. In other words, we choose to sin because we desire to sin. As we read in James 1:14-15:

**Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin (James 1:14-15).**

When we think about our hearts in terms of our commitments and desires, it is easy to see that the heart is essential for making ethical decisions. Sometimes we follow our good commitments and desires in order to make decisions that rightly apply God's Word to our lives. At other times, we follow our evil commitments and desires, refusing to live by God's Word. In either case, these choices rise from our hearts.

Having spoken of our heart as the more general faculty that we use when applying knowledge, we are ready to look at the will as a narrower, more specific existential faculty for making moral choices.

## WILL

Our will is our capacity for making decisions. It is our volition, our ability to make choices. So, each time we make a choice or a decision, we are using our will.

Like all our existential faculties, our will is a perspective on our whole person. So, we should not make the mistake of thinking that it is in tension with our other capacities and abilities. Rather, to speak of our will is to view our entire decision-making process from the perspective of the choices we make, and especially from the perspective of the final outcome.

Of course, making the right decision is often hard because our will is affected by our fallen nature. For the Christian, this means that while the Holy Spirit enables us to make decisions that please God, there is always the possibility that indwelling sin will persuade us to make sinful decisions.

Now, it is important to recognize that our will may be either active or passive. That is to say, sometimes we make decisions in a passive, unconscious manner, such as by force of habit. But at other times, the ethical questions we face require active reflection and conscious decisions.

Consider, for instance, the active way I might use my will when presented with the opportunity to steal a valuable piece of jewelry. When I see the jewelry, I have to make an active, conscious choice either to steal or not to steal it. In fact, we might go so

far as to say that every ethical matter that we recognize as a problem or quandary requires us to use our will in an active manner simply by virtue of the fact that we recognize it as a problem.

But there are many other ethical issues that we handle in a passive, unconscious manner, such as those that we deal with habitually, or that we respond to in a reflexive manner. For example, our will can be fairly passive when we are confronted with choices that we make on a regular basis, such as when we discipline our children. Now, at some point, most parents have used their will actively to determine which type of punishments they will use for their children, such as spanking, or taking away privileges, or assigning extra chores. But when it is actually time to administer discipline, we don't always think about the morality of our different options. Often, we simply fall into our habitual pattern.

Our will also functions in a passive, unconscious way when we respond by reflex. Here I have in mind those decisions that seem to be unbidden or even forced upon us. For instance, when I see a bird, I believe that it was created by God. It is not something I have to think through consciously, and it is not just my habit to think about these kinds of things. Rather, it is a belief that comes to me instantly because I recognize God's hand in his creation. Nevertheless, it is an act of will because it involves a decision. In this case, the decision is to acknowledge God as the creator of the bird.

So, in one way or another, either actively or passively, our will is involved in each and everything we chose to think, say, or do. It is the faculty we use to make every decision in our lives. So, if our decisions are to please our Lord, we must submit our will to him at every turn. We must will what God's Word commands, and we must allow the Holy Spirit working within us to influence our will in positive ways. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:13:

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

Throughout this lesson we have seen that God has given us many existential faculties that play important roles in choosing good. If we overlook any one of them, we run the risk of not being able to make truly moral decisions. But to make sure that we understand how each of these abilities and capacities functions in harmony with the others, let's consider a time when Jesus exercised all of these existential capacities and abilities to make an ethical decision. In Matthew 12:9-13 we read this account:

**[Jesus] went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other (Matthew 12:9-13).**

Let's look at this event in terms of our lesson. First, Jesus acquired knowledge. He used his experience to see and to recognize that the man before him had a shriveled hand. Jesus also used his imagination to set the goal of healing the man's hand and to consider the various ways he might answer the question that the Pharisees raised.

Second, Jesus assessed his knowledge. His reason drew an analogy between the legitimate practice of rescuing a sheep on the Sabbath and the action he was considering, specifically, healing a man on the Sabbath. And his conscience concluded that healing this man would be a good thing to do. His emotions caused him to pity the man.

Third, Jesus applied his knowledge. He began the application by determining in his heart to do good. His strongest commitment was to God, and his greatest desire was to act in a way that honored and glorified God, particularly by healing the man. Finally, Jesus used his will to make and to carry out his decision to heal the man.

So, we see that applying knowledge is the final step in each of our ethical decisions. It is where our heart determines to remain committed to our God, desiring to glorify him. And it is where our will chooses to think, speak, and do what his Word requires.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on choosing good, we have looked at our various existential faculties, our abilities and capacities, in terms of the three steps in our decision-making process: the step of acquiring knowledge where we gather information; the step of assessing knowledge where we evaluate the information we have gathered; and the step of applying knowledge where we actually make and act on our ethical choices.

Choosing the good should be every Christian's goal. We study ethics because we want to make the right choices. We examine God's Word, our modern situations, and ourselves to know how to make decisions that please the Lord. Throughout this series we have seen the importance of paying attention to all these factors and more. But ultimately, after all our study, every ethical problem comes down to an existential decision: will you choose what is good? Your answer to this question will determine if you have truly made a biblical decision.

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