

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 2

The Normative Perspective:
God and His Word

Manuscript



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Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
GOD AS STANDARD	2
God in Himself	2
Personal Attribute	2
Ultimate Standard	4
God as Judge.....	6
Implications	7
WORD AS STANDARD	8
Three Categories	9
Normative Character	10
General Revelation.....	10
Special Revelation	14
Existential Revelation	16
Unity	22
CONCLUSION	22
CONTRIBUTORS	24
GLOSSARY.....	26

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Lesson Two

The Normative Perspective: God and His Word

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

Our lesson will divide into two main parts. First, we'll look at God himself as our absolute standard. And second, we'll explore how God's word serves as our revealed

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

GOD AS STANDARD

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

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

GOD IN HIMSELF

There are many issues we could address as we think of God in himself as the absolute moral law. But for our purposes, we'll touch on two matters. First, we'll speak of goodness as a personal attribute of God. And second, we'll look at the fact that God's goodness is the ultimate standard for *all* goodness. In the first place, when we speak of goodness as a personal attribute of God, we mean that he himself is the standard by which all morality is measured.

Personal Attribute

We sometimes speak abstractly about concepts of goodness and rightness, and we often apply terms like "good" and "right" to impersonal objects and ideas. But these concepts are rightly derived from something much more fundamental: the goodness of God's person. Apart from God's character, there can be no such thing as goodness or rightness. Ethical value exists only as a reflection of God. In a very real sense, he is not just good and right; he is goodness and rightness themselves.

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

God is light, and 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).

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

God cannot sin because there is no moral or spiritual frame of reference above or beyond God to which God's actions, or thoughts, or will could be compared so that you might measure his actions, thoughts, or will against that standard. God's will is the standard for right action... God is the triune holiness that is the source and foundation of all things. So, God's will is an expression of his character. It's not something over and against his character. His will is always an expression of his character. And since there is no standard by which his holy character could be judged, and his holy character is always goodness itself, God cannot sin.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

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

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

By saying that only God met the standard of goodness, Jesus indicated that he was speaking of perfect and total goodness rather than of relative or derivative goodness. After all, the Bible does call other people good. But God's goodness is different. Unlike all other goodness, it is perfect in quality, absolute in degree, and unique to the persons of the Trinity. We find similar statements of God's supreme goodness throughout Scripture, such as in Psalm 5:4 where David declared:

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

And in Daniel 4:37, even the Gentile king Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed:

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

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

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

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

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

In the second place, when we speak of God in himself as the absolute moral law, we mean more than just goodness as a personal attribute. We also mean that God's goodness is the ultimate standard for all goodness.

Ultimate Standard

Unfortunately, many people have the misconception that there is a definition of "good" against which God himself must be measured. For example, some people think that God cannot be good if he judges human beings. Others believe that a good God would never allow evil. And on the basis of these assumptions, they mistakenly conclude that the God of the Bible cannot rightly be described as "good." But even though Christians reject the conclusion that God is not good, some believers still wrongly accept the notion that there is a higher standard of goodness to which even God himself must conform.

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

You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word...
You are good and do good; teach me your statutes (Psalm 119:65, 68).

In verse 65, the psalmist acknowledged that God's word was a standard for goodness. He even indicated that God's own actions could be judged good by this standard. And in verse 68, he proclaimed that God himself was good and that his actions were good, implying that God's actions were good because God had acted according to his word. Finally, the psalmist closed verse 68 by expressing his desire to learn God's statutes — that is, God's law — so that he might be conformed to God's goodness. In short, the psalmist measured God's actions by the standard of God's word — that is, everything that God revealed about himself — and found God's actions to be good. But the writers of Scripture also knew that the law is not external to God; rather, it is his self-expression.

It's not possible to judge God's actions or character by any standard that is external to him. God establishes whatever rules and authority

that there is, and he is the one that sets the standard for that. God's not going to say, "Do as I say; don't do as I do." His standards are a reflection of who he is, so there's not going to be anything external trying to govern God.

— **Rev. Clete Hux**

Consider, for example, that later in Psalm 119:137, 142, the psalmist wrote:

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

God's law is right and good because it comes from God, who himself is right and good. Because he is righteous, everything he does and everything he expresses — including his laws for us — manifests his goodness.

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

It's really common for skeptics, and even sometimes sincere believers, to read things about God in the Bible and wonder if he is actually good. At one time or another most of us have at least thought to ourselves how can the Lord be good and allow the horrible suffering that's going on in the world? How can he be good and command Joshua to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan? Why would a holy God curse the entire human race because of what one man, Adam, did? These are real issues that people face all the time, and they can be quite perplexing at times. Now, the wisdom books in the Bible like Job and Ecclesiastes as well as a number of passages in books like the book of James in the New Testament, help us answer these kinds of questions. But we must never expect God to live up to some standard of goodness that stands above him. Biblical faith rests on the firm belief that everything that is true of God, everything that God does, everything God commands is good because he is God. He's the very definition of goodness. He's the supreme standard of what is good. And there is no ideal of goodness that is higher than God himself.

— **Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

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

GOD AS JUDGE

Now, it's true that God delegates to human beings some responsibility for making ethical judgments. For instance, biblical passages like Romans 13 teach that according to the scriptures, legitimate human governments are given limited responsibility to honor good and punish evil. But the Bible also teaches that our human judgments are only correct and valid insofar as they mirror God's judgments.

Jesus himself made it clear that, on the last day, God himself will judge all people by their actions. And when he does, he will either confirm or condemn all the judgments that human beings have ever made. At that time, he will curse those whose works are evil, and he will bless those whose works are good. John 5:27-30 records Jesus' words on this matter:

[The Father] has given [the Son] authority to execute judgment ... all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment... my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me (John 5:27-30).

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

Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? ... Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor... Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you (Job 40:2-14).

It is God's right to judge because he has absolute authority, and his judgments are inescapable because he has absolute power. Although God's creatures may wish to escape his authority and power, they cannot. In the final analysis, there are only two options: Either we submit ourselves to him as our judge, seeking refuge in his mercy through Christ, or we defy him and suffer eternal punishment. And, in case we are tempted to resent God and distrust his judgments, we should hasten to add that all of his determinations are just and right. He is not capricious, but always judges according to the immutable standard of his character. As Elihu argued in Job 34:10-12:

Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him. Of a truth, God

will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice (Job 34:10-12).

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

Now that we have a basic understanding of God as the absolute moral standard, both in himself and as the absolute judge of morality, let's turn our attention to some of the implications of these matters for our lives.

IMPLICATIONS

When we spoke of God as the absolute moral standard, we referred primarily to God's existence in and of himself. And when we spoke of God as the absolute judge of morality, we focused mainly on his interactions with his creation. At this point, we'll turn our attention to the fact that God's power, and his authority to judge obligate his creatures to live according to the standard of his character. For example, in 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter instructed his readers in this way:

As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

In this passage, Peter affirmed that God's character is the ultimate standard for all human behavior. Peter also applied this idea by insisting that because God is the standard for all human behavior, humanity is consequently obligated to obey and to imitate God. We are to reflect his character.

Of course, it's important to realize that when we speak of imitating God, we're not talking about trying to usurp God's authority. We're not to act as if we are God and can do whatever God does in Scripture. Rather, we're to be holy as his *creatures*, as those who submit to God's directives for the ways *human beings* are to be holy. For example, when Peter wrote that we are to be holy because God is holy, he meant that God's character dictates what holiness is. And because God acts according to his holiness, we are also to act according to his holiness. We are to be holy in the ways he commands us to be holy.

Peter tells us in his first epistle in chapter 1 that God's holiness should affect the way we live in all our manner of life on a day-to-day basis. Peter says, "As the one who calls you is holy, we also must be holy in all that we do," and he quotes from the book of Leviticus to illustrate that because God is holy we must be holy in all of our actions. What this means, then, is that God's holiness has very practical ramifications for how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis as obedient children, who follow the teaching of Christ.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

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

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust... [B]e perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

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

Now, to most of us, this application probably seems obvious. After all, if God is the absolute authority who holds us accountable to an absolute standard, then it must follow that we are obligated to obey that standard. In reality, however, many people who are confronted with God's sovereign authority and righteous standard disregard God's commands and invent their own rules for their lives. Some believe that even if God has the power to judge them, he does not have the right. They may even believe that it is honorable and good to resist God, despite the consequences, much like one might resist an evil human dictator.

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

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

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

Having taken a closer look at the idea that God himself is the absolute ethical standard, we are now in a position to turn to our second main topic: the word of God as our revealed ethical standard.

WORD AS STANDARD

We have looked at a number of ways in which the Bible demonstrates that God himself is our absolute ethical norm. But the fact of the matter is that we only know what God is like because he has revealed himself to us through his word. Without this

revelation, his character would be mysterious and unknown, so that we would not be able to fulfill our obligation to follow his example. Fortunately, God's revelation teaches us many things about his character, enabling us to make informed ethical determinations that reflect this standard. So, while we insist that God himself is our ultimate norm, we must rely on his revelation or word as our practical norm.

To explore how God's word is our revealed ethical standard, we'll deal with three issues: First, we'll introduce the three categories of revelation; second, we'll speak of the normative character of these three categories; and third, we'll explore the unity of these three categories. In the first place, to move forward in our understanding of Christian ethics, we must come to grips with the fact that God has revealed himself in three ways.

THREE CATEGORIES

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

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

Now, many theologians throughout the history of the church have noted that one element of general or natural revelation stands out, stands out from everything else, and that has to do with us as human beings because we are the image and the likeness of God. More than any other aspect of nature, human beings reflect God, and this means that we can learn much about God and his will by focusing not on nature in general only, but also by giving special attention to ourselves and to other human beings as the image and the likeness of God. We speak of it as "existential" because it has to do with the existence of human beings and their experiences as the image and the likeness of God. And that is crucial in Christian ethics.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

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

NORMATIVE CHARACTER

We'll look first at the normative character of God's word found in general revelation; second, at the norms of special revelation; and third, at existential revelation as a revealed standard. Let's consider first how God's general revelation serves as an authority over us.

General Revelation

When we speak of general revelation, we're concerned with the way creation and history teach us true things about God and his moral requirements of us.

General revelation is what God reveals to us about himself or tells us about himself through creation and through providence, that is to say, through nature and also through the course of history. It's revelatory. It tells us about God as we see in, for example, Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God." So, contemplating the heavens, the heavenly bodies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars and so on, we can contemplate that there is a Creator who is glorious. And in Romans 1, also, Paul talks about that we can know about God, about his power and his wisdom through what we perceive in creation.

— Dr. Larry Trotter

Of course, general revelation can't teach us everything. For example, the way of salvation through Jesus Christ is taught only through special revelation. And other aspects of God's will come to us primarily through existential revelation. Also, the Bible emphasizes that when Adam and Eve fell into sin, the created world fell with them, so that nature itself has been corrupted. As a result, creation and history are hard to interpret. They no longer present us with a perfectly clear picture of God's character. Nevertheless, the Bible assures us that general revelation still speaks clearly enough to teach us true things about God. It reveals the perfect standard of God's character, and thus, serves as one of God's revealed norms.

We'll speak of two important features of general revelation as it applies to Christian ethics: its complexity and its importance. In the first place, general revelation is complex.

Complexity. It's common for Christians to think about general revelation in very simple terms, as if every form of general revelation were alike. In reality, however, there are varying degrees of generalness and specialness within the category of general revelation. Some aspects of general revelation are common to all people; whereas, others are restricted to very limited groups of people. Some aspects are rather vague in meaning;

whereas, others are particularly clear. Some aspects follow the natural order with very little indication of God's active, daily involvement; whereas, others clearly demonstrate God's supernatural intervention.

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

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:44-45).

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

On the other end of the spectrum, consider an example that appears very similar to special revelation — the history of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Most of us consider the facts of these events to be part of special revelation. But, as we've already said, history is part of general revelation. When we see what events God allows and how he governs the world throughout time, we learn a great deal about him. And the history of redemption, particularly of the work of Jesus Christ, tells us a tremendous amount about God, ourselves, and salvation. Listen to the way Paul expounded the history of the resurrection in Acts 17:30-31:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

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

This type of general revelation is very similar to special revelation because it is rare and unusual. Not many people saw Jesus when he lived and died. And his life and death themselves were highly extraordinary; they were unlike any other human life or death. His resurrection, in turn, was undeniably miraculous. Nevertheless, they do not reach the level of special revelation because they do not communicate how we are to repent or what total commitment to God fully entails.

In the second place, in Christian ethics, we need to affirm not only the complexity of general revelation, but also its importance for making ethical decisions. God holds all mankind accountable to recognize and conform to those aspects of his character that are revealed to us through creation and history.

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

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

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

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his 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 they are without excuse (Romans 1:18-20).

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

Paul tells us in Romans 1 that God makes himself known through the creation — his wisdom and his power and his goodness. And he also teaches that every human being, by virtue of being made in the image of God and living in God’s world, knows God through the things that are made. Sadly, the response of sin to that knowledge is ingratitude and rebellion. And so, when all people stand before God on the day of judgment, they will not stand before one whom they don’t know, but they’ll stand before one who has made himself known through the creation and whom they have chosen to rebel against.

— Dr. Guy Waters

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

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

Here Paul called general revelation a "decree," using the Greek word *dikaiōma* (δικαίωμα). Other translations render this word as "ordinance" or "judgment." The basic idea, however, is clear: general revelation is a revealed standard that is known to some extent by everyone and that God commands everyone to obey.

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

Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

Paul was saying that even though general revelation speaks clearly to us, we reject its obvious meaning in favor of other meanings.

Rather than acknowledging God in creation, ancient unbelievers invented false gods. Modern unbelievers commonly attribute creation to chance. And even many Christians have become accustomed to looking at creation through the eyes of modern unbelief. Nevertheless, God's revelation in creation is still binding. It is still God's revealed standard to which we must conform. Paul most likely was drawing from Psalm 19:1, where David wrote:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

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

Having seen that general revelation comes in many forms, and that all of its forms reveal God's norms, we should look at special revelation. Whether or not we find it easy to believe that general revelation is part of God's revealed standard, all Christians should easily recognize that special revelation is a norm that is binding on our lives.

Special Revelation

When we think in terms of general revelation, all men can have the knowledge of the existence of the Lord, but in terms of coming to know Christ as personal Lord and Savior, that has to do with special revelation... So even the capacity to believe, to have faith, to believe in Christ as Lord and Savior, that has to be given us by God himself. And so, at the end of the day, any capacity to know the Lord on a redemptive level, it has all to do with the triune God revealing that to us.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Just as we did with general revelation, we'll focus on special revelation's complexity and importance to Christian ethics. In the first place, special revelation is complex.

Complexity. Special revelation comes to us in a number of forms. Most of these forms rely on the spoken or written word, but all of them involve God communicating with people in ways that transcend the normal workings of creation. As we survey Scripture, we find many different examples of special revelation. In some cases, God appears visibly and speaks audibly to groups or individuals. In other cases, he is heard but not seen. At other times, he communicates through a mediator, such as an angel who appears to his people. God also commonly instructs those who have received his special revelation to write down what has been revealed. This written record is counted as Scripture, which is yet another form of special revelation.

Now, as varied as these different types of revelation are, they are all “special” in the sense that they represent extraordinary or supernatural communication between God and man. They involve God interrupting, as it were, the natural course of events in order to communicate more directly with his people. But even though these various types of revelation share this common bond, we can still distinguish between them. Some types of special revelation come through more distant mediation. These are the least special. We may even think about them as bordering on general revelation. But others come more directly from God with less mediation. These types of revelation are the most special.

On the “most special” end of the spectrum, Scripture tells us that Moses spoke with God directly and personally. As we read in Exodus 33:11:

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

There are several levels of God's revelation. Sometimes it's through visions and dreams. But when God spoke to Moses, it was face to face — or as it could be translated, “mouth to mouth.” ... This revelation was of the highest order, an infallible and inerrant revelation. Special

revelation never contains error.

— **Dr. Peter Chow, translation**

On the other end of the spectrum of special revelation, we find things like dreams. The significance of special revelation in dreams is not in the fact that a person dreams. Rather, it's in the fact that God uses this natural phenomenon to communicate truth to an individual. For instance, in Genesis 41, we find the account of Pharaoh's dream in which seven lean cows eat seven fat cows. Certainly, Pharaoh knew that the dream was supernatural. This is proven by his appeal to his counselors to interpret it for him. But *how* did Pharaoh know his dream was supernatural? God didn't directly address Pharaoh in the dream. He didn't send an angel to speak to him, as he later did for Joseph in Matthew 1 regarding the birth of Jesus. In fact, the only thing special about Pharaoh's dream was that God used it to communicate to Pharaoh. Apart from God's use of the dream, this revelation was indistinguishable from dreams that occur as a normal part of general revelation.

In short, some special revelation is fantastic and obviously supernatural, such as God's manifest presence with people like Moses. But other special revelation closely resembles normal, natural human life. In our day, the most common form of special revelation — and the only universally acknowledged form of current revelation — is Scripture. And even Scripture itself has some parts that are very special, and other parts that are a bit more common. For example, according to Exodus 31:18, God directly wrote the Ten Commandments, which were contained on:

... tablets of stone, written with the finger of God (Exodus 31:18).

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

As even some of your own poets have said ... "we are indeed [God's] offspring" (Acts 17:28).

Here Paul affirmed the conclusions of some of the Greek poets, and in this way, these pagan poets' words became part of special revelation. Other more common texts include certain proverbs collected by biblical writers and other quotes from pagan poets. And in Ezra 4, we find copies of the letters between King Artaxerxes of Persia and his servants in the Trans-Euphrates region.

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

In addition to the complexity of special revelation, we should also consider its importance for Christian ethics. All special revelation is normative for us. All special revelation is a standard to which we must adhere.

Importance. Consider, for example, Acts 17:28-30. After Paul quoted the pagan poets Aratus and Cleanthes, he went on to draw an application from their words that is binding

on all mankind.

As even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.” Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:28-30).

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

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

Because you have not obeyed my words, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north ... and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation (Jeremiah 25:8-9).

Because the people had refused to listen to God’s prophets, God threatened extreme covenant judgment against them. He warned them that he would bring them to “everlasting desolation” if they failed to repent.

When God reveals truth through his authoritative representatives, such as the biblical prophets and apostles, this special revelation is absolutely binding. Of course, in our day, we no longer have living, authoritative apostles and prophets, but we do have the Bible. Scripture is the most relevant form of special revelation for us today, and it is binding on all people at all times.

Having looked at the normative character of God’s word in both general and special revelation, we should turn our attention to existential revelation — God’s revelation through human persons.

Existential Revelation

Although it has not been common for theologians to speak about “existential revelation,” the idea that God reveals himself in and through persons has always been recognized by the mainstream of Protestant theology as a part of general revelation. In other words, we are not advocating a new kind of revelation here, but simply a different way of categorizing the same revelation that theologians have accepted for centuries. For example, listen to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 10:

The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be

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

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

Throughout history, when the church of Christ faced challenges, false teachings, criticism or difficulties, representatives from Christ's earthly church would gather in a certain place for a specific period to articulate articles to respond to these challenges. Such articles are based on a careful study of the Bible, based on God's Word. And they would formulate a confession... These declarations are not only expressions of what is in the Scripture, but also what the church has already held to. But now they have a formal expression. Such statements of faith are vital for believers to hold fast to, as they sum up what Scripture says concerning a certain issue.

— Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

We can call these human judgments forms of existential revelation. None is a simple presentation of history or creation, and none is a direct supernatural communication from God. Instead, each involves God's revelation through human beings, whether as the joint theological conclusions reached by groups of people, or as the judgments of individuals, or as the inward leading and illumination of the Holy Spirit within believers.

Existential revelation may be divided into two main categories: what we might call the external aspects of existential revelation and the internal aspects of existential revelation. The external aspects of existential revelation include such things as human existence, human judgment — both individual and corporate — and human behavior.

We can think of human existence as a form of revelation because human beings are created in the image of God. That is to say, in many ways, we are each a representative of God in the world. Human beings are the images that reflect God's glory and dignity. And because we reflect who he is, we can learn many things about God by looking at people.

In addition, individual and corporate human judgment is a form of existential revelation that is closely related to our being created in God's image. Listen to the way Moses recorded the history of the creation of mankind in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let

them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26).

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

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

Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name (Genesis 2:19).

This is the first example we find in Scripture of a person exercising the authority that God delegated to us. When Adam named the animals, he was thinking and exercising judgment. So, it’s fair to say that when human beings think and judge as an exercise of divinely delegated authority, we are reflecting God’s character.

This type of human judgment is precisely what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* refers to when it speaks of “councils...ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits.” For example, in Acts 15, early church leaders met in Jerusalem to render judgment regarding the practices of Gentiles who converted to Christianity. The council, which was attended and supported by apostles such as Peter and Paul, sent a letter explaining its determinations to the various churches then in existence. In Acts 15:28-29, Luke recorded that their letter included the following words:

It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:28-29).

Notice that the Jerusalem council claimed to be speaking for itself as well as for the Holy Spirit. Their understanding was that God could use their joint deliberations in order to determine the proper course of action for the church.

We have to be clear here: unlike Scripture, church councils are not infallible. Still, there is a biblical precedent for believing that God uses his corporately gathered people to reveal truth. This is the case whether the church meets in large councils or in smaller groups. Consider, for example, Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:16, 20:

Every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses... [W]here two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Matthew 18:16, 20).

Jesus taught that when two or three Christian witnesses rightly confirm a matter of church discipline, he supports their exercise of authority — the authority he himself has delegated to the church. So, it's safe to conclude that even when Christians in smaller groups meet and render judgments in the presence of Christ, God uses these judgments to guide his people into truth.

Ethical decisions in the Christian faith do not occur in isolation from other Christians. We live for Christ together, and the Holy Spirit bonds us to each other so that we lean on each other, we trust each other, we work with each other. And the Holy Spirit has gifted and called — imperfect but nevertheless gifted and called — teachers and leaders, and has called them to exercise wisdom. And they offer that wisdom to us so that we can learn how we can serve Christ faithfully. The body of Christ, both in the past and today, witnesses to the will of God and gives us guidance.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

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

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

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

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

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

[Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him,

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-17).

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

Of course, Peter was confronted with Jesus himself. Peter’s personal knowledge of Jesus was part of the process by which he came to understand that Jesus was the Christ. But many others who were confronted with Jesus did not come to this understanding. The difference was that the Holy Spirit worked within Peter to bring him to this understanding. Paul addressed the issue of the illumination of believers rather directly in 1 Corinthians 2:11-12, when he wrote these words:

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God (1 Corinthians 2:11-12).

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

It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should ... believe in him (Philippians 1:29).

The Greek word here translated “granted” is from the verb *charizomai* (χαρίζομαι), meaning “given freely.” Paul’s point is not that the Philippians were granted the opportunity to believe, but rather, that God gave to them, as a free gift, their very faith in Jesus.

Because of what sin has done in messing up our spiritual faculties, we are not able to discern the reality of God and his Word. The New Testament says picturesquely, we are blind at that point, we are deaf at that point, our hearts are hard at that point, so that the Word of God makes no impression on us at all. And then, the New Testament says that, “God” — I’m quoting now from 2 Corinthians 4 — “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,” — that’s back in creation of course — “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” That’s the illumination of the Spirit.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

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

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they ... show that the work of the law is written on their hearts ... and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (Romans 2:14-15).

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

God's law is not only something that he's communicated through Moses on tablets of stone, he's also written into the human heart and mind an understanding of his existence, his power, his glory, the allegiance we are due to him, as well as aspects of his moral law. And we are completely obligated to obey those.

— Rev. Kevin Labby

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

It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

Notice that Paul was not speaking here of what we know or believe, but rather of what we will or desire, of what motivates our actions. This, too, is a form of revelation because it communicates impressions and intuitions about God's character to us. And just as with all forms of existential revelation, because it reveals God's character, it is a binding standard that we must obey and to which we must conform.

The Spirit is the one that enables us to actually will to want to do the very things that God commands. And so, this is a strong emphasis on God's action, that it's God that enables a believer to do his will. But it's not only that God the Spirit enables us to want to do these things, God the Spirit enables us to actually carry them out. So, this is what Paul is meaning when he says the Spirit is at work, or God is at work

in us to will and to act. It's the "both/and," that from start to finish, the Spirit is the primary reason why we actually are able to act.

— **Dr. Uche Anizor**

We've looked at the three categories of God's revelation and we've seen how all of God's revelation provides us with norms that reveal the character of God. Now, we'll briefly explore the unity of these three categories.

UNITY

General, special and existential revelation are all intimately related. All reveal the same God, and therefore, all reveal the same standard, and all are binding and authoritative. But what does this mean for us as we try to make biblical decisions? As you'll recall, our model for biblical decision-making says that ethical judgment involves:

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

In light of this model, the unity of God's general, special and existential revelation indicates that we should inform all our ethical judgments by all the revelation available to us. Of course, Scripture is entirely sufficient to instruct us regarding Christian ethics. General and existential revelation don't give us new information about God's character and will that's not already revealed in Scripture, either explicitly or implicitly. And for this reason, the Scriptures are fully sufficient to guide us in all areas of life. But we will understand what Scripture teaches us much more clearly when we compare it to the rest of God's revelation. In fact, without the general revelation of books and language, we wouldn't even have access to the special revelation of Scripture. And of course, the illumination of the Holy Spirit — existential revelation — is crucial to our comprehending the message of Scripture.

Now, as you can imagine, we have to be very careful here. Acknowledging the full sufficiency and authority of God's special revelation in Scripture is always crucial when we seek to make biblical decisions. So, we'll explore the interconnections among special, general and existential revelation in much more detail in later lessons. But at this point, it's important to affirm that giving proper attention to all three forms of God's revelation is essential to applying the Scriptures to our lives.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored two aspects of the normative perspective in Christian ethics. We've seen that God himself is the ultimate standard for all ethical behavior, and that his character obligates all human beings to imitate him. We've also

seen that God himself is unknowable apart from his word, or revelation, so we must receive his revelation in all of its forms as our revealed or practical standard.

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

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GLOSSARY

charizomai – Greek verb (transliteration) meaning “to give freely,” “to grant,” “to forgive”

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

dikaiōma – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “decree,” “ordinance,” “judgment”

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

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

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

existential revelation – God’s revelation through human persons

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

illumination – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily cognitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

inward leading – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily emotive or intuitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

Jerusalem Council – Meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 where the apostles and church leaders addressed concerns in the early church; in particular, whether or not Gentiles were required to follow the Mosaic law to be saved

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

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

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