

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 3

The Normative Perspective:
The Attributes of Scripture

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

In nearly every nation, proceedings in courts of law often involve written documents. Things like receipts, letters, contracts, confessions and written statements by witnesses are used as evidence. But everyone knows that it is not enough simply to have such documents available to the court. For them to be used effectively, lawyers, judges, and juries have to know certain attributes or characteristics of these documents. Much time is often spent learning and establishing things like who wrote a particular document, who received it, when was it written, why was it written and what it states. Knowing these attributes is crucial to using these documents properly.

We have some similar concerns when we do Christian ethics. No matter what the ethical question, we always have at least one document that we need to take into account, namely the Bible. But what impact the Bible has on our decision varies from person to person. Some Christians rely almost entirely on the Bible as the unfailing and authoritative source of perfect answers to moral questions. Others value its advice but take its words with a grain of salt. While still others disregard it as irrelevant and out of touch with the modern world. And all these different perceptions of the Bible's usefulness in ethics have one thing in common: they are all based on an assessment of the Bible's attributes.

This lesson is the third in our series on *Making Biblical Decisions*. We've entitled it, "The Normative Perspective: The Attributes of Scripture." As we saw in a previous lesson, God's own character is our ultimate standard. And his word is our authoritative revealed standard because it infallibly teaches us about God's character. In this lesson, we'll focus on the attributes of Scripture in order to see more clearly how the Bible reveals God's character to us.

In earlier lessons, we established that ethical judgments always involve a person applying God's word to a situation. This outlook led us to see that there are three essential considerations that we must always take into account as we make ethical decisions: the standard of God's Word, the particulars of the situation, and the person making the judgment. We've identified these considerations as the normative, situational and existential perspectives in ethics. In this lesson we'll continue to address the normative perspective, looking for the proper standards for ethical decisions.

We'll divide our discussion of the attributes of Scripture into two parts: First, we'll investigate the attributes that Scripture possesses primarily by virtue of its divine authorship, namely, its power and authority. Second, we'll explore the attributes that Scripture possesses primarily because it was written for a human audience, that is, its clarity, necessity and sufficiency. Let's begin by looking at the divine authorship of Scripture.

DIVINE AUTHORSHIP

When we speak of Scripture's divine authorship, we're referring to the fact that the biblical authors were inspired by God and authorized by him to deliver his message. We're looking at the Bible as God's word to his people and emphasizing the fact that it is *God's* word.

As we explore the attributes that derive primarily from Scripture's divine authorship, we'll touch on two matters: first, the power of Scripture and second, the authority of Scripture. We can use the Bible more effectively in ethics if we understand some of the issues related to these two characteristics in further detail. So, let's turn our attention first to the power of Scripture.

POWER OF SCRIPTURE

As Christians, when we approach the subject of ethics, we're not merely interested in figuring out which things are good and which are evil. We're also interested in applying that knowledge by acting, thinking and feeling in ways that are morally praiseworthy. But where can we find the strength to carry out what we know to be right and good? In this pursuit, we're greatly aided by Scripture's power. As God's living and active word, the Bible doesn't just tell us what to do; it also empowers us to believe and to live in ways that please God and lead to his blessings.

Let's consider the power of Scripture, first, by looking at some examples of the power of God's word in its various forms, and second, by turning to the implications that this power has for ethical decision making. We'll start with a few examples.

Examples

As we've seen in prior lessons, God's word may take many forms. And the Bible indicates that God's word has always been powerful, even before it took the written form of Scripture. As we seek to demonstrate the power of Scripture, we'll start by looking at the power of God's word over creation. Next, we'll consider the power of his word through his prophets; then, the power of the preaching of the gospel. Finally, we'll explore the power of God's written word, or the Scriptures themselves. Let's begin by investigating the power of God's word over creation.

Perhaps the place where the power of God's word over creation is most easily seen is in the creation account of Genesis 1. Here, God spoke the world into existence. Throughout this entire chapter, the only action God performed was speaking. And by his spoken word, he created, ordered and filled the entire universe. We read in Psalm 33:6, 9:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host... [H]e spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm (Psalm 33:6, 9).

God's declaration had great power in the days of creation — so much power that his word brought the whole creation into existence! Now, it's not that the words themselves had innate power that God manipulated. Rather, God used his declarations as vessels to transmit his power. God's words are the means he uses to accomplish his ends, much as any human being might use a hammer to drive a nail into place.

In the second place, the Scriptures also make it clear that God's word has power when it comes through the mouths of inspired prophets. Isaiah 55:10-11 confirms this idea. There we read:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

This passage speaks of God's word going out from his mouth. But, in the context of the passage, it's apparent that the people of Judah heard this message, not directly from God's mouth, but from the prophet Isaiah. Even so, the message was still powerful when Isaiah spoke it. It still had God's power to accomplish his purposes.

God's prophets are the means by which he communicates to his people. And it's the way which God's word becomes effective within the midst of Israel's life. So, listening to the word of the Lord from the prophets is a means of grace within ancient Israel. This is how God spoke... And so, when you trace the history of Israel as it corresponds to God's prophets, what you see is when the people listen to God's prophets and follow their word, there's life in that. But when they don't, there are huge repercussions. And you see this with the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria; then eventually the southern kingdom to Babylon; and then the list goes on and on. So, all of that finds its root in hearing and taking heed to the prophetic word of the Lord.

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

A third way we see the power of God's word is through the preaching of the gospel. This is true even when the preachers are not infallibly inspired. For instance, in Romans 1:15-16, Paul directly stated that preaching the gospel carries God's power:

I am eager to preach the gospel ... for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:15-16).

The gospel Paul had in mind here was not just a set of truths about what Jesus had done, nor was it the power of God represented by the statements of the gospel. He did not mean that the gospel is *about* the God who has power, or about the things that God has

done with his power. Rather, Paul meant that the act of preaching the gospel is powerful because God uses preaching to bring people to faith. Paul made a similar statement in 1 Corinthians 1:18, where he wrote:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Notice again, that Paul was speaking about the message itself, not just about the historical facts related by the message.

In practice, people do not accept the truth of the gospel's claims while, at the same time, condemning God as foolish for saving humanity. Rather, people count the gospel message as foolish because they do not believe that its statements are true. To them, it sounds like a fanciful tale or even a lie, and they think that no right-thinking person would believe it. It is for this reason that the gospel seems like foolishness to unbelievers. But to people who believe the message, the preaching of the gospel is the power of God because it is the means by which God brings them to a saving knowledge of the truth.

Realizing that God's word is powerful over creation, in the prophetic word, and even in the fallible preaching of the gospel, we are in a position to understand the power of the written word of God, the Scriptures.

Jesus himself pointed to the power of God's written word when he told the familiar story of the poor beggar Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. You'll recall that when the rich man died, he looked up from hell to see Lazarus being comforted by Abraham. The rich man worried that his family would also perish in hell. So, he asked Abraham to raise Lazarus from the dead and send him to preach repentance to the rich man's family. In Luke 16:29-31, we read Abraham's answer:

They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them... If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead (Luke 16:29-31).

At least two elements of this passage pertain to our discussion. First, Abraham was speaking about Scripture. He referred to "Moses and the Prophets," not as living people who continued to speak in person, but as authors who continued to speak through the Bible, God's written word. And just as the words of Moses and the prophets were powerful when God inspired them to speak during their earthly lives, they continued to be powerful in written form.

Second, Abraham said that the written words of Scripture have as much power to bring people to repentance as does the tremendous miracle of seeing someone raised from the dead. In many respects, this passage is one of the most astounding statements about the power of Scripture found in the Bible. We all realize that witnessing someone raised from the dead would be an immensely influential experience. It would potentially have life-transforming power. But here, Jesus actually indicated that reading the Bible has power beyond even witnessing a resurrection from the dead. The apostle Paul affirmed this idea in 2 Timothy 3:15 when he wrote:

The Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through

faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15, NIV).

Studying Scripture is like preaching because it is a means through which God gives people the understanding and faith necessary for salvation. Just as the preached word carries God's power, so does the Bible itself.

With these examples of the power of Scripture in mind, we're in a position to reflect briefly on the implications of these matters for the process of making ethical decisions.

Implications

One passage that touches on the practical implications of the power of God's word is Hebrews 4:12-13:

The word of God is living and active ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from [God's] sight (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Notice here that the writer of Hebrews speaks of God's word as "living and active." It's not a mere collection of inert information that has no potency.

Rather than viewing God's word as static, we are to approach it as an active living thing, full of power to accomplish what God desires. And what does the word of God do in the area of ethics? As the book of Hebrews tells us, the word of God discerns our hearts. It is able to penetrate and evaluate our deepest thoughts and motives. And it has the power to save us from condemnation and to enable us to live holy, moral lives.

Scripture penetrates our hearts more powerfully than other books because Scripture is not like other books. It's only the Scriptures that are the inspired word of God, God-breathed. While other books may, you know, move us and motivate us one way or the other, only the Scriptures are God's word, and so it's totally different from any other book.

— Rev. Clete Hux

Listen to how Paul continued the passage in 2 Timothy that we read earlier. In 3:15-17, he wrote:

The Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15-17, NIV).

The Bible's power is not just in leading us to our initial faith in Christ. As God's voice, Scripture also has the power to equip us "for every good work." The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to give us faith and wisdom. And through Scripture, he molds our characters in such a way that when we are confronted with moral choices, we are able to choose the good and refuse the bad.

Many times, Christians find themselves frustrated by their attempts to live ethical lives. They feel helpless and impotent to do what is right and good. In such situations, it's a great encouragement to know that learning the Scriptures, meditating on them, and reminding ourselves of what they say, is not an exercise in futility. It's much more than simply reading an ethical guide. Instead, God's written word actually empowers us to live for God. Learning and meditating on the word of God in Scripture brings us into contact with the power of God that will always accomplish his purposes. In this way, the power of Scripture is essential to Christian ethics.

In addition to the power of Scripture, a second attribute of the Bible that derives from divine authorship is the authority of Scripture.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Because the Bible is divinely inspired, it carries God's authority. In one sense, we've already proven this authority by demonstrating that Scripture is God's voice — his living, active word to every generation. God has all authority; therefore, whenever and however he speaks, all who hear him are obligated to obey him. This is the idea we put forth in our earlier lessons when we said that all revelation is normative because it teaches us about God, the ultimate standard for morality. Nevertheless, it's still valuable to see how the Bible speaks about its own authority.

We'll consider the authority of Scripture, by turning first to the Bible's claim of authority, and then by exploring some moral implications of this claim for our lives. Let's begin with the Bible's claim of authority.

Claim of Authority

If the Bible is God's word, there can be no higher basis of authority. You can't appeal higher up than the Bible because the Bible is God's word, so you can't have the church corroborating its authority, or tradition corroborating its authority, or some inner peace that, as we read the Bible, we detect it to be the word of God. Although that is true, the Holy Spirit does witness to the Bible's self-authenticating nature, and that's an important concept. But ultimately, the Bible authenticates itself. There is no higher corroboration than God himself, and the Bible is God's word.

— Dr. Derek Thomas

The Bible claims divine authority for itself in at least two ways. First, it provides historical examples of its authority. And second, it offers explicit claims of its authority. We'll address the historical examples of the Bible's authority first.

Historical Examples. As we've seen, there's a close connection between God's spoken and written word. In the earliest history recorded in the Bible, God spoke directly to humanity, and his speech carried authority. For example, in the account of the creation and Fall in Genesis 2, 3, God commanded man to cultivate the Garden of Eden and not to eat the forbidden fruit. Eve, however, chose to listen to the spoken word of the serpent instead of to the spoken word of God. In doing so, she rejected the authority of God's word. Adam, in turn, listened to Eve's spoken word instead of to God's word, also rejecting God's authority. But the authority of God's word was not destroyed by these actions. Rather, God enforced his spoken word's authority by punishing Adam and Eve, and all creation with them.

Later, in the days of Moses, God encoded his spoken word in written form. Instead of simply telling Moses what the Ten Commandments were, he carved these laws on stone tablets. He also gave Moses many other laws and commanded Moses to record those words in writing. These records comprised the Book of the Covenant that we read about in Exodus 24. They were the stipulations of God's covenant with his people. And they carried not only God's authority, but also his promise to enforce these laws with power, both by blessing the obedient and cursing the disobedient. Listen to this account in Exodus 24:4-8:

Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord... Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exodus 24:4-8).

In this record, we find that God's spoken word is the basis for his written word, and that the written word is God's authoritative covenant document that his people are obligated to obey. Many centuries later, when God's people had rejected the things written in Scripture, God sent foreign nations to afflict them in war. The prophet Isaiah ministered during this time, and in Isaiah 42:24, he wrote these words:

Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? (Isaiah 42:24).

God did not hesitate to enforce his word in Isaiah's day, just as he had not hesitated to enforce it in the Garden of Eden. But this time, the word that was violated was God's law. It was Scripture, the written words of the covenant between God and his people. Just as God's spoken word is authoritative revelation, so is his written word.

We have a similar confirmation of the authority of Scripture in a variety of New Testament examples. For instance, Jesus frequently appealed to Scripture to justify and explain his actions. In John 17:12, Jesus prayed these words:

I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled (John 17:12).

Here, Jesus contrasted his eleven loyal disciples with Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. And in this contrast, he indicated that both his protection of the eleven and his losing of the one were done in accordance with Scripture.

The apostles also demonstrated their belief in the Bible's authority. For example, Paul appealed to the Scriptures as proof that Christians should not be vengeful. In Romans 12:19 he wrote:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

Paul's argument quotes the book of Deuteronomy 32:35. His assumption here is that the Old Testament carries authority when it assigns vengeance to God. So, by placing his readers under moral obligation to the Old Testament, Paul demonstrated his belief that the Scriptures are God's authoritative word — a word that binds even New Testament believers.

Explicit Claims. Besides proving Scripture's claim of authority through historical examples, the Bible also proves its authority through explicit claims to that effect. One of best-known statements claiming authority for the Bible is found in 2 Peter 1:19-21, where Peter wrote:

We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention ... For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God (2 Peter 1:19-21).

Here Peter indicated that the Old Testament prophetic writings continue to be authoritative in our day. Because these prophecies were inspired and authorized by God, they form a binding moral standard to which we must "pay attention." That is, we must believe what the prophets wrote, and obey what they commanded.

The apostle Peter said, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but [holy] men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The holy men here are the writers who wrote either the Old Testament or the New Testament, and it says, "they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The word "carried along" means "held up." They were carried along as if the Holy Spirit held them up and led them during the process of inspiration. Indeed,

we don't know how the details of this process happened. It was a miraculous process. We cannot put the details under the microscope to know how the Holy Spirit worked in them. What we know is that he used their backgrounds; he used their cultures; he used their circumstances and the circumstances of their original readers... He used all their gifts, all their culture, and all their ideas, which he himself put in them, and he led them in the process of inspiration in a great, miraculous way that produced this unique book for us.

— Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail, translation

James also made it clear that the Old Testament is still God's authoritative word to us. In James 2:10-11, he wrote:

Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder" (James 2:10-11).

Notice how far James went in emphasizing this point. First, he insisted that the written law is still binding. Those who break it are guilty. Second, James based the ongoing authority of Scripture on the authority of the one who gave the command, namely God. Because the Bible is still God's word, it still carries God's authority.

We also find claims for the *New Testament's* authority in places like John 13:20. Here, Jesus gave his apostles authority when he said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me (John 13:20).

The apostles used the authority Jesus gave them not only in speaking, but also in writing the documents we now have in the New Testament. This authority is evident throughout the New Testament in every instance in which they issued written commands. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 3:6, where Paul wrote:

We command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

Here Paul issued a direct written command that carried his delegated authority from Jesus Christ.

The apostles frequently used their authority to transmit their instructions in written form. And because the New Testament consists of documents that the apostles either wrote or approved, it carries the apostles' authority, which is the authority of Christ himself.

Now that we are without the apostles' preaching in person, we have it written for us in the text of the New Testament. So, these are the

eyewitnesses, these are the people who knew Jesus, these are the people who listened to his teaching, these are the people who witnessed his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven. So, the New Testament represents the authoritative apostolic teaching from these witnesses of Christ's life and work.

— Dr. Constantine Campbell

Now that we've seen how Scripture claims and proves its own authority, we should touch briefly on some implications of this authority for believers today.

Implications

Put most simply, Scripture carries God's authority, so we are morally obligated to conform all of our choices, actions, thoughts and feelings to it. We might say that ethical behavior equates to keeping the Word of the Lord.

Keeping the Word of the Lord must be done in at least two ways: We must conform to Scripture's breadth by obeying all of its commands, and we must conform to its depth by obeying these commands with commitment and conviction. On the one hand, God's people must keep the breadth of biblical instruction.

Breadth. The Bible is clear that followers of Christ are not to obey what we like in Scripture and ignore what we don't like. We're to obey *all* of Scripture. Of course, we should admit that some things that the Bible requires of us are more difficult to accept than others. But we're still called to submit to all that God has commanded in Scripture. Listen, for instance, to Exodus 15:26, where the Lord told Israel:

If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians (Exodus 15:26).

At a time when the people of Israel were receiving God's commands in written form, God equated keeping all his decrees with doing what is right. In essence, we do what is right when we obey all of Scripture. The breadth of our obligation to submit to Scripture comes out even more clearly in 1 Kings 11:38, where God said these words to Jeroboam:

If you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments ... I will be with you (1 Kings 11:38).

You'll recall that in our first lesson in this series, we defined moral goodness as that which God blesses. Here, God promised blessings on Jeroboam if Jeroboam did what

was right. And God explicitly defined “what is right” as whatever he commands. Goodness is not found in keeping just some of the law of God while rejecting other parts.

The fact that God calls his people to observe the authority of all of his word without exception should challenge us in our own day, just as it challenged God’s people during biblical times. Sadly, believers sometimes respond to this challenge by imagining that God does not mind if they follow only some of his moral directives. They wrongly think that God has given them liberty to ignore those commands that they find uncomfortable or difficult. But even if we don’t try to justify our rejection of some of Scripture’s moral teachings, we need to realize that we all fall into the trap of unconscious selectivity. For this reason, we must constantly return to Scripture to be reminded of those commands we may have overlooked or forgotten.

On the other hand, God’s word has authority over us not just in the full breadth of its teaching, but also in the depth of obedience it requires of us.

Depth. In both the Old and the New Testaments, the Bible connects obedience to God’s word with love for God. Moral goodness is not obtainable through begrudging obedience, or even through a love for goodness itself, apart from a love for God. Instead, our obedience rests on the fact that God has called us in love and authority to be his willing servants. Listen to the way Moses expressed this idea in Deuteronomy 7:9, 11:

The Lord your God is ... the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations ... therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today (Deuteronomy 7:9, 11).

Because God has called us into a loving relationship with himself, we are obligated to obey his commands, which are set down for us in Scripture. Jesus himself repeated much the same idea in the New Testament. In John 14:15, 21 Jesus told his disciples:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments... Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me (John 14:15, 21).

And by his example, Jesus demonstrated that we must also render this type of loving obedience to the Father. As he said in verse 31 of John 14:

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father (John 14:31).

Time after time, Scripture indicates that the moral requirements God places on us are based in his love for us and are to be fulfilled in our love for him. So, we see that according to the Bible, we cannot do the right thing unless we have the right motive. Or, to put it another way, only when we embrace the Scriptures deeply, from the heart, can we rightly submit to the authority of God’s word.

God doesn't want us to just simply *act* right, but God wants us to *be* right with him and for him; therefore, godly motives — motives that are based on wanting to love God for his grace, wanting to reflect the glory of God in our lives because we understand ourselves as made for him and made through him and by him, and we understand that living in a godly way is actually the greatest fulfillment of our truest natures — therefore, godly motives for our right action are just as important as the right actions themselves.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

We've looked at Scripture's power and authority, those attributes that Scripture has primarily by virtue of its divine authorship. Now, we should turn our attention to our second topic: those attributes of Scripture that relate more closely to its human audience.

HUMAN AUDIENCE

When God inspired and authorized the writers of Scripture, he had a particular goal in mind. Specifically, he wanted to give his people clear revelation concerning his will and his character so that they would be better able to conform themselves to him. Consequently, a number of Scripture's attributes stem from the fact that God inspired Scripture for his people.

We'll consider three attributes that Scripture possesses because it was written for a human audience: its clarity — sometimes called its “perspicuity” — its necessity, and its sufficiency. Let's look first at the clarity of Scripture.

CLARITY

When we say that Scripture is “clear,” we don't mean that everything in the Bible is easy to understand, or that everything in the Bible is stated plainly and directly. Instead, we mean that the Bible is not obscure. It's not filled with hidden meanings that can only be discovered through mysterious means, or through special spiritual gifting, or by those who hold special offices in the church.

As we approach the subject of the Bible's clarity, it will help to look at two matters: The nature of the Bible's clarity and some implications of the Bible's clarity. Let's think first about the nature of the clarity we find in Scripture.

Nature

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* offers a good introductory summary of the nature of the clarity of Scripture. In Chapter 1, section 7, it states:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Here the *Confession* addresses two aspects of the clarity of Scripture. First, it speaks of, “All things in Scripture.” And second, it focuses on “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation,” namely, the gospel. Let’s take a closer look at both of these ideas, beginning with the relative clarity of the gospel.

Simply put, Scripture speaks so plainly about the gospel that nearly everyone should be able to figure out that salvation comes through repentance and faith in Christ. Of course, this doesn’t mean that everybody *does* figure out the gospel. As the Confession points out, we have to make “due use of the ordinary means” if we expect to take advantage of the Bible’s clarity. That is, we have to read responsibly and diligently, not carelessly, and not with an agenda that twists what Scripture tries to teach us. In reality, many factors complicate our reading of the Bible, not the least of which is our sin. If we fail to handle the Bible reasonably, or twist it according to our sin, we won’t discover the gospel. But again, this is our failure. It doesn’t result from any lack of clarity in Scripture.

Notice also that the Confession does not say that a person can read any portion of Scripture and discover the way of salvation. Rather, it says that the gospel is made clear “in some place of Scripture or other.” That is, Scripture as a whole presents a clear gospel message. A person who doesn’t read the whole Bible may never come across the passages that present the gospel in a way that is easily understood. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the Bible does present the way of salvation with enough clarity that it can be learned directly from Scripture.

Now, although the Scriptures are particularly clear about the gospel of salvation in Christ, the Confession also makes some observations about “All things in Scripture.” It says that matters other than the basic Christian gospel are “not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.” In other words, Scripture may not be very plain regarding some of its teachings. In actuality, there are many things in the Bible that are not as clearly taught as the way of salvation. Still, God gave us Scripture in order that we might understand the things he revealed in Scripture and apply them to our lives. As Moses told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

In this passage Moses made a crucial distinction that we should remember as we explore the use of Scripture in Christian ethics. He distinguished between secret things and things revealed.

God does keep some secrets from us. He does not tell us everything he knows, nor does he tell us everything we might want to know. There are matters — even matters of ethics — that God keeps to himself. Even so, what God has told us in Scripture is not a secret. The Scriptures fall into the category of “things revealed.” As Moses said, they are shown to us in order that we might follow and obey them.

Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us the secret things belong to the Lord our God, which means there are some things that God knows and we don't because he hasn't revealed them. And there's a humbling reminder in that that I think can be good for us when we run up against issues where we would like to know more, but we find that more is not disclosed. We're not God. And that's a good thing to be reminded of, even as we read the revelation of God, that God has the prerogative to reveal what he sees fit, what is best for us, and if there are things that he doesn't want to reveal, not to reveal those. And in that recognition, we're reminded that we're dependent not only on the things that God has revealed but to trust his character for the things that he hasn't revealed.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

Having looked at the nature of the clarity of Scripture, let's consider some implications of the Bible's clarity in ethics.

Implications

To one degree or another, God has revealed his will to us with sufficient clarity to guide us in ethics. He has given us the Bible so that, through “due use of the ordinary means,” through reading and studying, we can come to know God's will for all areas of our life.

As Paul exhorted Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture ... is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV).

All Scripture is clear enough to be useful, if we apply ourselves to study it diligently. For this reason, each one of us must be ready to search the Bible to discern its teaching in ethical matters. Now, again, we are not saying that Scripture is easy to understand in every respect. In fact, some portions of Scripture are quite a bit less clear than others. And beyond this, some people have a greater ability than others to understand the words of Scripture. As Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:16:

There are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist ... as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

Not everyone has an equal ability to understand the Bible. And not everyone makes equal effort to study it. Nevertheless, if we apply ourselves sufficiently, we can all come to know God's will well enough to conform ourselves to his standard for morality.

Now that we've explored Scripture's clarity, we're ready to look at the second attribute that Scripture possesses primarily because it was written for a human audience: its necessity.

NECESSITY

When we speak of the necessity of Scripture, we have in mind that people need the Bible, especially for ethical decision making. As we explore our need for Scripture, we'll touch on three matters: the necessity of Scripture for salvation, the necessity of Scripture for faithful living, and the implications of our need for Scripture. In the first place, Scripture is necessary for people to find the way of salvation.

Salvation

As we saw in a prior lesson, general, special and existential revelation overlap greatly. But general and existential revelation only provide human beings with sufficient information to condemn them for failing to keep God's standard. Only Scripture provides sufficient information to secure salvation. Listen to the way Paul touched on this in Romans 10:13-17:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Romans 10:13-17).

Paul made the point that the gospel message is the normal means by which God delivers faith to individuals. And apart from the word of Christ, people have no access to the gospel message. This truth makes the word of Christ a necessary means to salvation. Of course, theologians typically recognize that there are exceptions to this, such as the salvation of infants and others who lack the mental capacity to understand the gospel. But in most circumstances, we cannot be saved except through the word of Christ.

But what is this word of Christ? In the tenth chapter of Romans, Paul primarily had in mind the preaching of the gospel. But he also had in mind the Scriptures themselves as the source of the gospel message. Look again at Romans 10. The phrase, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” is actually a quotation from Joel 2:32. Paul's use of Scripture in this way follows a pattern that appears throughout the Bible.

In the Bible, the gospel proclamation is closely associated with the written word of Scripture. For example, in the Old Testament, God often delivered his messages directly to prophets who spoke God's word to the people. But God also insured that the prophetic word was written down so that it could be learned by those who were not present at the proclamation. Following this Old Testament pattern, the apostles first learned the gospel directly from Jesus. Then they delivered it, not only through preaching, but also through their writings in the New Testament.

The practical outworking of this process is that human beings, by and large, receive knowledge of the gospel from the Scriptures. And in this way, they come to faith and salvation, either through their own reading of the Bible or through preaching based on the Bible. Of course, there's an important difference between the written word of Scripture and preaching based on Scripture. Scripture is inspired by God, infallible and absolutely authoritative in every case. Preaching is not. Insofar as preaching is faithful to Scripture, it is true, authoritative and powerful. But because we are fallen human beings, preaching is never fully true to Scripture. Unlike preaching, Scripture is stable and unchanging, it is a fully reliable and trustworthy standard. Preaching, church tradition, theological instruction, and many other sources of information are all helpful. But all of these contain a mixture of truth and error. Only Scripture is absolutely, unfailingly, unquestionably reliable. Therefore, Scripture is necessary, both as a record of the gospel, and a basis and criterion for the preaching of the gospel.

It's the responsibility of the preacher to truly exegete the Scriptures and bring forth that message and bring it to bear unto the current situation. And if that is not done based upon the, so-to-speak, God's honest truth and the inerrant word, then it becomes merely the preacher's opinion. And it is difficult for us to even evaluate one another as to whether we are heretics or whether we are orthodox; whether we are sticking with what the Word has thus proclaimed. So it's extremely important for preachers, for believers to understand that we have the text that God wants us to have and that it is absolutely inerrant over all that it is addressing, and it is an infallible Word that leads us along the path of redemption and salvation.

— Dr. John Norwood

In the second place, Scripture is not only needed for salvation, but it is also necessary for faithful living.

Faithful Living

You'll recall that in a previous lesson we established that general, special and existential revelation are all true and authoritative. Why then do we set apart Scripture as a special case of necessary revelation? The answer is that while general and existential revelation are infallible and authoritative, they are much harder to interpret than Scripture is. Sin has corrupted nature and humankind, so that we no longer see only a pure

reflection as God intended it. As a result, it's often very difficult to know how to interpret general and existential revelation. Sometimes it's almost impossible to tell if what we're seeing is the result of God's intention in creation, or the result of sin's corruption of creation.

In addition to this, Scripture speaks much more clearly and directly than general and existential revelation do. This makes our ethical determinations based on Scripture more secure and more reliable than those based on other forms of revelation. This is why the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 10 insists on the primacy of Scripture over other sources of information:

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's point here is that all of these other sources are valuable, but the Bible is the most valuable of all. It is through the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit speaks most clearly.

Having considered the necessity of Scripture for salvation and faithful living, what are some moral implications of our need for Scripture?

Implications

There's a very important sense in which we simply cannot be moral without attending to the teaching of Scripture. And as we saw earlier, learning and believing the basic content of Scripture is necessary to salvation, whether we study the Bible directly or learn its central teachings from others. Only those who are in Christ are capable of true morality. In short, without Scripture, salvation is not possible, and therefore, morality is not possible. People who think they can ignore the teaching of Scripture and still be moral are seriously mistaken. In this sense, Scripture is necessary to our ability to behave morally.

It is not uncommon for Christians to depend heavily on their experiences of life, the opinions of others, and their own moral intuitions as they make ethical decisions. And, as we have seen, these and other features of general and existential revelation are important to consider. But we must also recognize that in many circumstances, general and existential revelation are not clear enough to show us the proper course of action, whereas Scripture reveals God's word in sufficient detail to teach us what is right.

The need for Scripture beyond general and existential revelation can be seen in places like Acts 15. Here, a controversy arose in the early church when Gentiles began to be converted to Christianity. On the one hand, some within the church believed that Gentiles should be instructed to observe the law of Moses in the ways that Judaism of the time had come to observe it. They wanted Gentiles to be circumcised, to offer the appropriate sacrifices at the temple, and to apply the law to their lives in traditional ways. On the other hand, men like Paul and Barnabas argued that God did not expect Gentiles

to live as first-century Jews. The issue was so problematic that the apostles and elders met to discuss and investigate it.

Some of the people's opinions came into conflict with the reality of the Holy Spirit's ministry among uncircumcised Gentiles. So, these sources of information were not sufficient to provide a satisfactory solution. But once James, the brother of Jesus, appealed to Scriptures that addressed this problem, the church united behind his position. Listen to Acts 15:16-17, where James quoted Amos 9:11, 12:

After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things (Acts 15:16-17).

Using this Old Testament text, James pointed out that God would include many Gentiles when he restored his kingdom. More importantly, these converts would remain Gentiles even after they had been called to the Lord.

In the Old Testament, Gentiles who converted became Jews and followed traditional Jewish practices. But, Amos indicated that when God restored his kingdom in Christ, the Gentiles would be included without having to follow Jewish traditions. So, to answer the moral questions raised in Acts 15, it was necessary to use Scripture to interpret general and existential revelation.

Having this understanding of the clarity and necessity of Scripture in mind, we're now in a position to explore the sufficiency of Scripture.

SUFFICIENCY

Most basically, we could say that the sufficiency of Scripture is:

the ability to fulfill the purpose for which Scripture was written

Not surprisingly, this simple idea becomes complicated because it's hard for Christians to agree on what the purpose of Scripture actually is.

As we investigate the issue of Scripture's sufficiency, we'll begin by looking at Scripture's purpose in relation to its sufficiency. Next, we'll address some common misunderstandings of sufficiency, and finally we'll speak about the popular but mistaken idea that Scripture is silent on certain matters. Let's start with the purpose of Scripture.

Purpose

The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 6 summarizes Scripture's purpose this way:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His

own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

The *Confession* rightly concludes that Scripture’s purpose is manifold. It mentions that the Bible was written to teach us how to glorify God, to bring men and women to salvation, to instruct believers regarding the content of their faith, and to guide us in Christian living. These ideas of the Bible’s purpose come from Scripture itself. For instance, the Bible teaches in many places that Scripture has been given to us so that we might glorify God by obeying his commands. One place this can be seen rather clearly is in the covenant curses in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 28:58-59, Moses wrote:

If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions (Deuteronomy 28:58-59).

Here, Moses pointed out a striking correlation between obedience to God’s written commands and the glorification of God. In this curse, we see the idea that if mankind fails to revere and glorify God, it’s not because Scripture is insufficient, but because human beings have failed to make proper use of Scripture. The Bible was designed to teach us how to glorify God, and it is sufficient to accomplish this purpose.

What do we mean when we say Scripture is sufficient? We mean it is sufficient in two areas. We have everything in Scripture that we need to believe; we have everything in Scripture we need to live to the glory of God. God has revealed all that we need in Scripture for faith and life, for salvation. And that is how we come to be saved, and that is how we live as saved people. So, we don’t go outside the Scripture to find out what God would have us to know about him, such that we may be saved in Jesus Christ. And we have everything that we need in Scripture, a full and comprehensive guide for life so that we may live to the glory of God as Christians.

— Dr. Guy Waters

The other purposes listed in the *Confession* — “salvation, faith and life” — are expressed in places like 2 Timothy 3:15-17. In this passage, Paul instructed Timothy to remain steadfast in his study of Scripture in order to gain these benefits that Scripture was designed to deliver. In 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul explicitly taught the sufficiency of Scripture for *salvation* when he wrote these words:

The Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15, NIV).

When Paul said that Scripture is “able” to make us “wise for salvation,” he meant that by studying the Bible, we can learn the things that are necessary for us to know if we are to be saved. Paul believed this to be true because he knew that the Bible was powerful. But he also knew that it was designed to provide specific benefits, like the knowledge that leads to salvation. And because the Bible is able to accomplish this purpose, it can rightly be called sufficient for salvation.

In much the same way, Scripture is also sufficient for faith. Look again at Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:15. Paul said that the Scriptures are able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” The content of saving faith is revealed in the Bible as the means through which we are justified and receive our salvation from God.

Finally, the Bible is sufficient to guide us through life, the ongoing practice of our saving faith in Christ. Paul’s well-known statement in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 makes this clear:

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

Besides being intended to bring us to faith in Christ for our salvation, Scripture is also intended to prepare us for “every good work” — not just for some good works, but for *every* good work. And because Scripture is powerful to accomplish its intended function, it’s right to say that it is sufficient to guide us in our Christian lives. If we rightly understand the whole Bible, then we’ll know God’s standards sufficiently to make proper determinations about any given ethical issue, and we’ll be able to apply them to any situation.

Now, understanding the sufficiency of Scripture for life raises a serious question: How can any book, even one as large as the Bible, cover every conceivable moral problem, equipping us for every good work? Well, in truth, the Bible does not address every conceivable moral issue directly. Scripture speaks directly only to a limited number of issues in life, such as the fundamental content of our faith, and our basic responsibilities toward God and other people. But in so doing, Scripture lays down principles that we can extend and apply beyond the specifics mentioned in the Bible.

This is why the Confession distinguishes between what is “expressly set down in Scripture” and what must be deduced from Scripture by way of “good and necessary consequence.” In all cases, however, Scripture provides us with the information we need to discover God’s ethical standards.

The last point we should note in the Confession’s explanation of the sufficiency of Scripture is the qualification that Scripture is complete so that “nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” Scripture contains all the norms we need as Christians. Human traditions and authority structures, such as civil and ecclesiastical governments, are to be obeyed for the Lord’s sake. But they are never to be counted as absolute or ultimate norms. So, when human norms conflict with biblical norms we must always go against them.

We see this demonstrated in Scripture time and again. For instance, in Jesus’ day the established Jewish leadership allowed moneychangers and vendors in the temple area.

But when Jesus saw this, he became angry and drove them from the temple, because the human leadership had allowed violations of scriptural norms within the temple grounds. We read this account in Matthew 21:12-13:

Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple ... He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers" (Matthew 21:12-13).

When Jesus said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer," he was quoting Isaiah 56:7. He rightly understood the biblical norm that the temple was to be dedicated to prayer. But the Jewish leadership had permitted the temple grounds to be profaned by secular transactions. Jesus' condemnation that they were making the temple "a den of robbers" is actually incredibly strong. This phrase comes from Jeremiah 7:11, where it refers to idolaters and violent criminals who pay lip service to God at his temple.

By his actions and words, Jesus demonstrated that following any human law or tradition is sinful when the human norm contradicts Scripture. In every case, Scripture is sufficient to establish all moral norms, whether directly or indirectly. The ethical ordinances of men, however, are valid and binding only insofar as they echo biblical norms. But when human norms contradict biblical norms, the Christian is obligated to defy them.

How do we respond as God's people when the authoritative realm in this world, or our own government, contravenes the law of God? ... You may recall in the Old Testament with Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that the civil governments dictated a law where they were forced to worship an idol. And how did those men respond to that? Did they worship an idol because it was the law of the land? Well, no, of course not. They obeyed God's law in that respect. God said, you have one God before you and no other. And that's the law that they obeyed. In the New Testament we see where Peter and John were in the temple, and they were preaching Christ, and the Sanhedrin called them to task and said, "You will not teach Christ. You will not teach in this name anymore." Well, how did Peter respond to that? Peter simply said, you know, "I'll let you be the judge. Are we to obey the law of man or are we to obey God?" And of course, they obeyed God. And so that's the key. If the law of the land contravenes or contradicts the law given to us by God, we have to obey the law of God.

— Dr. Jay Haley

Now that we've looked at Scripture's purpose in relation to its sufficiency, we should turn our attention to some common misunderstandings of the Bible's sufficiency.

Misunderstandings

We'll group these misunderstandings into two fairly general categories: first, views that overestimate Scripture's sufficiency; and second, views that underestimate Scripture's sufficiency. Let's begin with views that overestimate Scripture's sufficiency.

Overestimate. Typically, those who overestimate the sufficiency of Scripture have very strong commitments to the Bible. But they frequently lack proper commitments to general and existential revelation. As a result, they wrongly believe that they can properly apply Scripture to ethical questions without having much knowledge, if any, about specific situations and people. They believe that making ethical decisions is as simple as reading the Bible and obeying it. But in reality, before we can obey or apply the Bible, we must also know something about the people and situations to which we are applying it. God has provided us with this information in general and existential revelation. If we ignore these other forms of revelation, we're ignoring the tools he has given us for interpreting and understanding Scripture.

Underestimate. Of course, not all misunderstandings are based on overestimating the Bible's sufficiency. Many more errors come from underestimating it. Those who underestimate Scripture's sufficiency generally insist that the Bible is sufficient to guide us only in limited areas of life. They believe it gives us moral instruction only on certain topics. For instance, Thomas Aquinas argued that general and existential revelation are sufficient to teach many moral principles. And Scripture supplements this knowledge by giving us information on those subjects that these other forms of revelation don't cover, such as the way of salvation. More recently, others have argued that the Bible does not address matters such as gay marriage, abortion and euthanasia.

But as we've seen, either through explicit or implicit teaching, the Scriptures provide us with a comprehensive system of ethical norms. In this sense, the Bible's sufficiency is unlimited when it comes to revealing the will of God for his glory, and for our salvation, faith and Christian living. General and existential revelation also contain some of these norms, but they contain no additional norms beyond those found directly or indirectly in Scripture. The point is simply that the Bible speaks sufficiently to every area of life, so that our true duty toward God is always an application of Scriptural norms.

At this point, having considered Scripture's purpose and some misunderstandings of Scripture's sufficiency, we'll speak about the popular but mistaken idea that Scripture is silent on certain matters. This is perhaps one of the most common ways that well-meaning Christians underestimate the sufficiency of Scripture.

Silent

Christians frequently teach that some issues of life are morally "indifferent." They say that the Bible doesn't provide us with sufficient information to know God's will on these matters. Historically, these matters have been known as *adiaphora*. The typical

position has been to say that indifferent things are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves.

Although many people throughout the history of the church have held such views, this position actually runs contrary to the teachings of Scripture. For example, while some theologians speak of impersonal objects as indifferent or “neutral,” the Bible speaks of them as being good. Even after the fall of mankind into sin, Paul still insisted that everything was good. As he wrote in 1 Timothy 4:4-5:

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

Paul spoke specifically about food in this context, but the principle is far broader. It extends to all creation, just as God himself proclaimed at the end of the creation week. For this reason, even impersonal objects are not “indifferent”; they are good.

Some theologians have also applied the term “indifferent” or *adiaphora* to choices between two or more good options. They have suggested that when all the choices are good, then Scripture is indifferent as to which we choose. But Scripture teaches that God blesses some good choices more than he blesses other good choices, and that Scripture sometimes praises one good option over another good option. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 7:38, Paul wrote:

He who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better (1 Corinthians 7:38).

Now, it should be noted that scholars do not agree as to the precise circumstances Paul addressed here. But his words are clear enough to demonstrate that both marrying and not marrying were good options, and that not marrying was the better option. In this sense, the Scripture is not really “indifferent,” even when we have to choose between good options.

The basic decision we face as believers in a whole range of choices in our lives is whether or not we’re going to obey God. When it is clearly a matter of obedience or disobedience, when God has made his will crystal clear, then the choice is similarly clear. However, there are also a huge range of choices we face which appear equally good, where there is no apparent best route for us to take. In those cases, we have to take the whole of the Bible into account and realize that not only has God given us his Spirit as his people to guide us as he opens up the Scriptures for us and helps our understanding, but God has also given us his wisdom which he continues to grow in us through the Spirit of wisdom. So, where God has not made it clear that there is only one choice, where there is a best choice arising out of the good choices we face, it seems that God leaves us to follow him faithfully... And where we become aware of the fact that we are being foolish or

disobedient, there is a willingness on our part to repent and take a step back and seek to take the path of obedience once again.

— Dr. J. Gary Millar

You'll recall that in our first lesson, we defined Christian ethics as:

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

By this definition, aspects of human beings and their lives are either good or evil. Those things that are good receive God's blessing, and those that are evil do not receive his blessing. Nothing and no one is indifferent or neutral. Either God blesses or he does not. There is no middle ground. If he blesses, it is good. If he does not bless, it is evil.

Of course, there are some words, thoughts and deeds that are good in some situations but evil in others. For example, sexual relations within marriage are good, but sexual relations outside marriage are evil. This does not mean that sexual relations in and of themselves are neither good nor evil. Rather, they are good, just as God created them to be good. But unmarried partners misuse sexual relations so that, in their situation, such relations are evil.

Finally, some theologians use the category of *adiaphora* to cover matters where we cannot determine what choices are good or evil. But because we know that the Scriptures touch on every aspect of life, at least indirectly, we must not treat matters about which we are uncertain as indifferent.

It's true that followers of Christ often have difficulty discerning how the Scriptures direct their thoughts and actions. It isn't always easy to see what the Scriptures teach. But our inability to discern God's instructions is not because God's word fails to address every area of life or because the Bible takes a neutral stance on some matters. Rather, the Scriptures address every person and every situation either directly or indirectly, sometimes through specific instructions and at other times through more general principles.

For this reason, when we find it difficult to see how the Scriptures address an ethical choice, we must be humble and do the best we can at the moment. Yet, we must always be ready to correct our decisions by continuing to study Scripture, our supreme and sufficient authority. We must also devote ourselves to understanding our circumstances better, to gaining wisdom from other believers, and to seeking the Lord's help through prayer. By these means, we'll be able to improve our understanding of what the Bible teaches, we'll move forward in our sanctification as Christ's followers, and we'll live in greater conformity to the will of God in every area of life.

In an earlier lesson, we said that the biblical model for making ethical decisions may be summed up by saying that ethical judgment involves:

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

We must act on a proper understanding of our moral standard, our goals, and our motives. Or to put it another way, we must act on normative, situational and existential

concerns. Failure to reach a proper ethical judgment can be caused by a failure to assess any of these perspectives properly. We may fail because we overlook or misunderstand the passages of Scripture we are dealing with. We may fail because we overlook or misunderstand the situation associated with the ethical question. And we may fail because we overlook or misunderstand the existential and personal aspects of a matter. In all cases, when we cannot come to a firm conclusion on an ethical decision, it's not proper to conclude that God has not revealed the information necessary to make the decision. And it's not proper to say that the matter is indifferent — that there isn't a right course to follow. Rather, we must continue to read, study, pray and investigate the issue, doing the best we can with our provisional judgments as we seek further illumination from the Spirit of God. As we'll see more clearly in the lessons that follow, followers of Christ must always seek to deepen their understanding of the normative, situational, and existential dimensions of every ethical decision.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've looked at several important attributes of Scripture that help reveal God's character to us. We've seen that because Scripture has divine authorship, it is powerful and authoritative. We've also seen that because Scripture is written for a human audience, it is clear, necessary and sufficient.

Keeping the attributes of Scripture in mind is helpful to us in many ways as we study Christian ethics. For one thing, it reminds us that the Bible is indispensable when it comes to answering ethical questions. We must always seek its answers because it is authoritative over all aspects of life, and because there are many questions that only the Bible can answer. For another thing, remembering the attributes of Scripture is greatly encouraging, because it reminds us that God has provided Scripture in order to benefit us, in order to teach us about himself and his standards. And finally, the attributes of Scripture give us confidence in our ethical conclusions since we are assured that the Bible's ethical teachings are both sufficient and clear. So, it is important that we remember and rely on the full range of Scripture's attributes as we progress in our study of Christian ethics.

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GLOSSARY

adiaphora – Greek word (transliteration) meaning "morally indifferent"; refers to things that are neither forbidden nor commanded in Scripture

Aquinas, Thomas – (ca. 1225-1274) Italian theologian and Dominican friar who wrote *Summa Theologica*

Book of the Covenant – A collection of laws found in Exodus 20:18–23:33 that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai

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

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

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

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

existential 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

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

perspicuity – Term meaning "clarity"; in theology, used to describe the fact that the Scriptures can be understood

revelation – God's communication of truth to man

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