

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 3

The Normative Perspective:
The Attributes of Scripture

Manuscript



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Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
DIVINE AUTHORSHIP	2
Power of Scripture	2
Examples.....	2
Implications.....	5
Authority of Scripture.....	6
Claim of Authority.....	6
Implications.....	9
HUMAN AUDIENCE.....	10
Clarity of Scripture	11
Nature.....	11
Implications.....	12
Necessity of Scripture.....	13
Salvation	13
Faithful Living	14
Implications.....	15
Sufficiency of Scripture.....	16
Purpose.....	16
Misunderstandings	19
Silence.....	20
CONCLUSION	21

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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 their documents. Much time is often spent learning and establishing things like who wrote a particular document, who received it, when it was written, why was it written and what it states. Knowing these attributes is crucial to using these documents properly.

We have 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 of lessons on *Making Biblical Decisions*. We have entitled this lesson "The Attributes of Scripture." As we have seen in the previous lesson, God's own character is our ultimate standard, whereas his Word is our authoritative revealed standard because it infallibly teaches us about God's character. In this lesson we will 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. And this outlook led us to see that there are three essential considerations that must always be taken 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 have identified these three considerations as the normative, situational and existential perspectives in ethics.

In this lesson we will address the normative perspective again, looking for the proper standards for ethical decisions. We will divide our discussion of the attributes of Scripture into two parts: First, we will investigate the attributes that Scripture possesses primarily by virtue of its divine authorship, namely, its power and authority. Second, we will 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 the divine authorship of Scripture, we are looking at God's word to his people and emphasizing the fact that it is "God's word." As we explore the attributes of Scripture that derive primarily from its divine inspiration, we will touch on two matters: the power of Scripture, and the authority of Scripture. Of course, most evangelical Christians instinctively recognize that the Bible is God's powerful, authoritative word to every generation. Yet, most of us have never thought through many of the issues related to these attributes of Scripture. But we can use the Bible more effectively in ethics if we understand these characteristics in further detail. So, let us turn our attention to the power of Scripture.

POWER OF SCRIPTURE

As Christians, when we approach the subject of ethics, we are not merely interested in figuring out which things are good and which are evil. We are 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 are greatly aided by Scripture's power. As God's living and active word, the Bible does not 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 unpack this concept 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.

Examples

As we have seen in our prior lessons, God's word may take many forms. And the Bible indicates that God's word is powerful even when it does not take the form of Scripture. As we seek to demonstrate the power of Scripture, we will begin by looking first at the power of God's word over creation. Next, we will touch on the power of his prophetic word, and then on the power of the preaching of the gospel. Finally, we will explore the power of God's written word or Scriptures. Let's begin by investigating the power of God's word over creation.

When we consider the power of God's word, it is often helpful to think first about how his word is powerful over the creation. Perhaps the place where this is most easily seen is the creation account of Genesis 1, where God spoke the world into existence. Throughout the entire chapter, the only action that God performs is speaking. And by his spoken word, he creates, orders, and fills the entire universe. As Psalm 33:6 and 9 comment regarding this account:

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the

breath of his mouth... [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 creation into existence. It is not that the words have innate power that God manipulates. Rather, God uses his declarations as vessels that transmit his own 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 confirm this idea. There the prophet wrote:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish ... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Although this passage speaks of God's word going out from his mouth, in the context it is apparent that God was referring to the preaching of the prophet Isaiah. The people of Judah heard this word of the Lord, not directly from God's mouth, but from Isaiah. Even so, the message was still powerful when Isaiah spoke and wrote it; it had God's power to accomplish his purposes.

A third way in which we may see the power of God's word is through the uninspired preaching of his Word or the gospel. The New Testament frequently confirms this idea when it says that God works through the preaching of the gospel even when the preachers are not infallibly inspired. For instance, in Romans 1:15-16, Paul directly stated that the preached gospel carries God's power:

I am so eager to preach the gospel ... because it is the power of God for the salvation of 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 message of the cross is foolishness 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 Bible.

Jesus himself pointed to the power of the written word when he told the familiar story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. You will recall that when the rich man died, he looked up from hell to see Lazarus being comforted by Abraham. The rich man, worrying that his family would also perish in hell, asked Abraham to raise Lazarus from the dead and to send Lazarus 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 listen to them... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises 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, written by God's inspired prophets, 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 raise the dead would be a tremendously influential experience. It would potentially have life-transforming power. But here Jesus actually indicated that reading the Bible has even more power than 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).

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

Implications

With such an understanding of the power of the Word of God in creation, inspired prophetic speech, fallible preaching, and the Bible, we are in a position to reflect briefly on the implications of these matters for the process of making ethical decisions.

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 ... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation 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 is not a mere collection of inert information that has no potency. On the contrary, when we approach God's word, we are to view 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 this passage says, the word of God judges our hearts. It is able to penetrate and to 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. Listen to how Paul continued the passage in 2 Timothy that we read a moment ago. In 2 Timothy 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 man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

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 to mold 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 is a great encouragement to know that learning the Scriptures, reminding ourselves of them, even meditating on the Scriptures, is not an exercise in futility. It is much more than simply reading an ethical guide. Instead, the word of God in Scripture actually empowers us to live for God. Constant learning and meditation on the word of God brings us into contact with the power of God that will always accomplish his purposes. In this way, the power of Scripture is of essential importance to Christian ethics.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

A second attribute of the Bible that derives from divine inspiration is the authority of Scripture. Because the Bible is divinely inspired, it carries God's authority. In one sense, we have 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 first lesson when we said that all revelation is normative because it teaches us about God who is the ultimate standard for morality.

Nevertheless, it is still valuable to see how the Bible speaks about its own authority, as well as to look at some moral implications of this authority. We will turn first to the Bible's claim of authority, and then to the implications of this claim for our lives.

Claim of Authority

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

When we remember the close connection between the spoken word of God and the written word of God that we have already seen in this lesson, we can see many ways in which the Bible gives us examples of the authority of God's word that apply to the Bible itself. 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, and thereby 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 thereby destroyed. 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 everything the Lord had said... Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will

do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.” Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is 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. Isaiah ministered during this time, and wrote these words in Isaiah 42:24:

Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law (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.

The New Testament also confirms the authority of Scripture through its examples. For instance, Jesus frequently appealed to Scripture to justify and explain his actions, as in John 17:12 where he prayed these words:

I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled (John 17:12).

Jesus here 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 ought not to be vengeful. In Romans 12:19 he wrote:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord (Romans 12:19).

Paul’s argument here assumes 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 that binds even New Testament believers.

Besides proving its authority through examples, the Bible also proves its authority

through explicit statements to that effect. One of the best known statements claiming authority for the Bible is found in 2 Peter 1:19-21, where Peter wrote:

We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it... For prophecy never had its origin in 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.

James also made it clear that the Old Testament is still God’s authoritative command to us. As he wrote in James 2:10-11:

Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking 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 authority of the New Testament. For instance, Jesus gave his apostles authority when he said in John 13:20:

I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me (John 13:20).

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

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

Here Paul issued a direct written command that carried his delegated authority from Jesus Christ. This approach was typical of the apostles; they frequently used their authority to transmit their instructions in written form. Because the New Testament consists of documents that the apostles either wrote or approved, it carries the authority of the apostles, which is the authority of Christ himself.

Implications

Now that we have seen that Scripture proves its own authority, we should touch briefly on some implications of this idea. Most simply, because Scripture carries God's authority, we are morally obligated to conform all our choices, actions, thoughts, and feelings to it. We might say that ethical behavior equates to "keeping the word of the Lord." And 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 commandments with commitment and conviction.

On the one hand, God's people must keep the breadth of biblical instruction. Followers of Christ are not to obey what we like and ignore what we do not like. Now, we should admit that some things the Bible requires of us are more difficult to accept than others, but we are still called to submit to all that God has commanded in Scripture. Listen for instance to Exodus 15:26, where the Lord told Israel these words:

If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought 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 the Scriptures.

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 do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands ... I will be with you (1 Kings 11:38).

You will 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, sometimes believers 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 do not 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.

In the second place, 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. For example, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the Bible connects obedience to Scripture 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. Rather, the basis of duty is 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, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands... Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give 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 he told his disciples:

If you love me, you will obey what I command ... Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me (John 14:15, 21).

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

The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me (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.

Now that we have looked at power and authority of Scripture — those attributes that Scripture has primarily by virtue of its divine authorship — 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 in order that they would be better able to conform themselves to

him. So, at this point in our lesson, we will focus our attention on the attributes that Scripture possesses primarily by virtue of the fact that God inspired it for his people. This aspect of our discussion will cover three of Scripture's attributes: its clarity, its necessity, and its sufficiency. Let's look first at the clarity of Scripture.

CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

When we say that Scripture is "clear," we do not 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 is 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, sometimes called its "perspicuity," 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 every mentally competent person should be able to figure out that salvation comes through repentance and faith in Christ. This does not 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 will not discover the gospel. But again, this is our failure; it does not 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, the Scripture as a whole presents a clear gospel message. A person who does not read the whole Bible may never come across the passages that present the gospel in a way that he could easily understand. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the Bible does present the way of salvation with enough clarity that any competent person is capable of learning them directly from Scripture.

Although the Scriptures are particularly clear about the gospel of salvation in Christ, the *Confession of Faith* also makes some observations about all of 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 fact, there are many things in the Bible that are not as clearly taught as the revelation of the way of salvation.

Still, God gave Scripture to us 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 revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow 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.

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).

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:

[Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, 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 have explored Scripture's clarity, we are ready to look at the second attribute that Scripture possesses primarily because it was written for a human audience: its necessity.

NECESSITY OF SCRIPTURE

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 will 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.

Salvation

In the first place, Scripture is necessary for people to find the way of 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, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ... Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:13-17).

Paul's point here is rather clear: 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 makes the word of Christ a necessary means to salvation in all but the most exceptional circumstances. The only exceptions theologians typically

recognize are cases involving infants or other mentally incompetent individuals.

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 source of the gospel message. For instance, the words “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” are actually a quotation from Deuteronomy 30. Paul’s use of Scripture in this way follows a pattern that appears throughout the Scriptures. Specifically, 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 and then 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, and thereby come to faith and salvation from the Scriptures either through their own reading of the Bible or through preaching based on the Bible. Of course, there is 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.

Faithful Living

In the second place, Scripture is also necessary for ethical living. You will 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 is often very difficult to know how to interpret general and existential revelation. Sometimes it’s almost impossible to tell if what we are seeing is the result of God’s intention in creation, or the result of sin’s corruption of creation.

And in addition to this, Scripture speaks much more clearly and directly than do general and existential revelation, making 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 these other sources are valuable, but that the Bible is the most valuable of all because it is through the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit speaks most clearly.

Implications

What, then, are some moral implications of the necessity of Scripture? There is a very important sense in which we simply cannot be moral without attending to the teaching of Scripture. And as we saw earlier in this lesson, 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.

In addition to this basic need for the word of God, Scripture is also necessary for human morality because it contains information that is not included in general and existential revelation. 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 will in sufficient detail to teach us what is right.

For instance, Acts 15 records that a controversy arose in the early church when Gentiles began to be converted to Christianity. Some within the church believed that Gentiles ought to be instructed to observe the law of Moses in the ways that Judaism of the time had come to observe it. That is, they wanted Gentiles to be circumcised, and to offer the appropriate sacrifices at the temple, and to apply the Law to their lives in the ways that had become customary for Jews of the day. 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 the issue. Opinions of some people came into conflict with the reality of the Holy Spirit's ministry among uncircumcised Gentiles. And these sources of information were not sufficient to provide a satisfactory solution. But once James appealed to Scripture that addressed this problem, the church united behind his position. Scripture

was necessary because general and existential revelation were not sufficient to answer this moral question.

To solve this controversy, James, the brother of Jesus turned to Amos 9:11-12. In Acts 15:16-17, James quoted Amos as follows:

After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things (Acts 15:16-17).

From this text, James understood 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.

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

SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

Most basically, to say that Scripture is “sufficient” is to say that it is able to fulfill the purposes for which it was written. But not surprisingly, this simple idea becomes complicated because it is hard for Christians to agree on what the purpose of Scripture actually is. So, as we investigate the issue of Scripture’s sufficiency, we will begin by looking at Scripture’s purpose in relation to its sufficiency. Next, we will address some common misunderstandings of sufficiency, and finally we will speak about the popular but mistaken idea that Scripture is silent on certain matters.

Purpose

With regard to the relationship between Scripture’s sufficiency and purpose, it will be helpful to look again to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which contains a very good summary of this idea in chapter 1 section 6. The *Confession* states the matter 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 in order that we might glorify God by obeying his commands. One place this can be seen rather clearly is in the covenant curses in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 28:58-59 Moses pointed out a striking correlation between obedience to the written commands of God and the glorification of God.

If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name — the Lord your God — the Lord will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants (Deuteronomy 28:58-59).

The Bible is designed to teach us how to glorify God, and it is sufficient to accomplish this purpose. Scripture contains all the standards that we need to know to glorify him.

Regarding “man's salvation, faith and life,” Paul instructed Timothy to remain steadfast in his study of Scripture in order to gain these benefits that Scripture was designed to deliver. In this context, in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 Paul explicitly taught the sufficiency of Scripture. He wrote these words in verse 15:

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

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 not only that the Bible was powerful, as we saw earlier in this lesson, but also that it was designed to provide these specific benefits. 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 holy Scriptures ... are able to make you 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 man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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. Because it is intended to prepare us for “every good work,” and because it is powerful to accomplish its intended function, it is right to say that Scripture speaks sufficiently about every good work. If we rightly understand the whole Bible, then we will know God’s standards sufficiently to make proper determinations about any given ethical issue as long as we also have a sufficient understanding of the persons and the 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 in order 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. The decision to follow or not to follow human norms must be guided by Scriptural norms. And human norms will always be defied when they conflict with biblical norms.

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 area and drove out all who were buying and selling there... “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers’” (Matthew 21:12-13).

Jesus rightly understood that Isaiah 56:7, which he quoted, revealed 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. That phrase is

drawn 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. 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.

With a proper understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture in mind, we should now turn our attention to some common misunderstandings of the Bible's sufficiency.

Misunderstandings

We will 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.

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 and 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 are ignoring the tools he has given us for interpreting and understanding Scripture.

But not all errors are based on overestimating the Bible's sufficiency. Many more errors come from underestimating it. This error generally appears as an insistence that the Bible is sufficient to guide us only in limited areas of life, that 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 that Scripture supplements this knowledge by giving us information regarding those subjects that natural and existential revelation do not cover, such as the way of salvation. In recent years, others have argued that the Bible does not address matters such as so-called monogamous homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia.

As we have 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 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.

Silence

At this point, we will speak about the popular but mistaken idea that Scripture is silent on certain matters, perhaps one of the most common ways that well-meaning Christians underestimate the sufficiency of Scripture. Specifically, Christians frequently teach that some issues of life are morally “indifferent” because Scripture does not provide us with sufficient information to know God’s will on these matters. Historically, these have been known as “*adiaphora*.” This typical position has been that indifferent things are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves.

Although many people throughout the history of the church have held to such positions, this position actually runs contrary to the teachings of Scripture. For example, whereas 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 God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated 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, extending 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:

So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better (1 Corinthians 7:38).

Now, it should be noted that scholars are not agreed as to the precise circumstances Paul addressed here. But his words are clear enough to demonstrate that marrying and not marrying were both 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.

You will recall that in our first lesson, we defined “good” as being that which receives God’s blessing, and “evil” as that which does not receive his blessing. By this definition, aspects of human beings and their lives are either good or evil; 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.

That being said, it is true that 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. But 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 is true that we often feel as if we cannot know which particular choices, thoughts, actions, or attitudes are good and which ones are evil. But such situations occur not because God's word is insufficient, and not because the Bible takes a neutral stance, but because we fail to recognize or to understand how to apply the truth that the Bible has disclosed.

This failure to reach an ethical judgment may take any number of forms. As you remember, the biblical model for making ethical decisions may be summed up in this way:

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, on normative, situational and existential concerns. Failure to reach a proper ethical judgment can be caused by a failure properly to assess any of these perspectives. 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 misevaluate the existential and personal aspects of a matter.

In all cases, when we cannot come to a firm conclusion on an ethical decision, it is not proper to conclude that God has not revealed the information necessary to make the decision. And it is not proper to say that the matter is indifferent, that there is not a right course to follow. Rather, we must continue to read, study, pray and investigate the question, doing the best we can with our provisional judgments, but reserving final judgment until the normative, situational, and existential issues become clear.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at several important attributes of Scripture. We have seen that because Scripture is divinely inspired, it is powerful and authoritative. We have also seen that because Scripture is written for human beings, 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 in 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 sure 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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