

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
ONE

ETHICS IN SCRIPTURE



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson One

Ethics in Scripture

INTRODUCTION

I think every Christian would agree that ethics is in crisis in our day, not only in the world out there among unbelievers, but also in the church. Unbelievers go in a million directions trying to figure out the difference between right and wrong. Even well-meaning Christians are all over the map when it comes to ethical and moral living. I've met some Christians who seem to have very few moral convictions at all, and I've met other Christians who seem to have simple answers to every ethical question.

I guess the older I get, the more I'm convinced that one of our greatest needs today is a way to understand how Scriptures apply to our lives, how we should think, act and feel — a way to make biblical decisions.

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

DEFINITION

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

In general terms, ethics is the study of moral right and wrong, the study of what is good and what is evil. This definition will suffice as a basic orientation toward ethics, but in these lessons we are not as interested in the broad study of ethics as we are in the particularly Christian or biblical view of ethics. So, we will work with a definition that is a bit narrower than the study of moral right and wrong. We will define Christian ethics as:

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

In order to understand the significance of our outlook on Christian ethics, we will look at three aspects of this definition: First, we will notice how it draws attention to God

and his blessings. Second, we will see the breadth of issues that are included in Christian ethics. And third, we will take note of how Christian ethics goes beyond mere actions. Consider first how our definition focuses on ethics as a matter of God and his blessings.

GOD AND BLESSINGS

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

By focusing on God and his blessing in this way, we mean to say two things: First, God's nature is the standard of morality. And second, God's actions demonstrate the standard of morality. Let's look at these two ideas in a bit more detail.

Divine Nature

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

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

God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true. If we walk in the light, as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

This metaphor of God as light is primarily a moral evaluation. Darkness is equated with sin and lies, and light with truth and purity from sin. It is a picture of God as perfectly free from sin in his very nature. And it is a description of sin as that which is foreign to the nature of God.

In light of this passage and others like it, we are obligated to see God's nature as the standard and model of goodness and rightness. And for the same reasons, we are compelled to condemn as sinful, evil and wrong those things that oppose his nature.

Divine Actions

The second thing we mean to say by focusing on God and his blessing is that God's actions demonstrate the standard of morality. One of the chief ways

God shows his approval for what is right and good is by bestowing blessings. Similarly, he shows his hatred for what is wrong and evil by withholding blessings and pouring out curses. We see this principle in action innumerable times through the Bible.

For example, in explaining the terms of his covenant to Israel in Leviticus 26:3, God offered to bestow tremendous blessings on them upon the condition that they “walk in [his] statutes and keep [his] commandments.” But beginning in verse 14 of the same chapter, he threatened horrible curses on them if they did not obey his every word. Listen to the way he introduced these curses in Leviticus 26:14-16:

If you do not listen to me and do not do all of these commandments, if you despise my statutes, and if your soul hates my judgments so as not to do all my commandments, and to break my covenant, I will do this to you: I will appoint terror over you, consumption and fever destroying your eyes and causing your soul to pass away (Leviticus 26:14-16).

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

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

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

BREADTH OF ISSUES

In the past, ethics was seen as a subsection of theology that dealt with practical moral issues. Christian ethics was normally taught as if it were just one of many theological disciplines. In this older model, much of theology could be done with little to no concern for ethics. As a result, teachers of ethics frequently dealt only with very small portions of theology and life.

By contrast, our definition stresses that Christian ethics touches every dimension of the Christian life. Ethics is: Theology viewed as a means of determining what is good and evil.

In one way or another, every theological discipline and subject deals with God’s blessings on good and curses against evil. Every discipline of theology obligates us to

believe certain facts, to do certain things, and to feel certain emotions. And because it is right to believe, do and feel these things, and wrong not to, all theology involves the study of right and wrong. All theology involves ethics.

Now beyond this, Christian ethics touches on every area of life. Theology itself is not restricted to a small area of life. In the third chapter of my book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, I define “theology” as “the application of the Word of God to all of life.” In other words, theology is not just reflection on God and his Word. Rather, it is reflection that carries through to application. Nothing stands outside God’s moral standards.

Consider this approach to ethics and theology in light of 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be fully qualified, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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

DEPTH OF ISSUES

In addition to focusing on the breadth of the subject of ethics, our definition addresses not only behavior, as is common in many ethical systems, but also the attitudes and natures of individual persons. Our definition of Christian ethics highlights which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessings and which do not. God’s moral standards hold us accountable in our actions, in the thoughts and inclinations of our heart, and in our very natures.

Now, we can say with certainty that the Bible emphasizes good behavior. And it is generally obvious to most people that actions can properly be considered right or wrong, so that we will not spend much time explaining the reason for including behavior in this definition. But we must also remember that Scripture views attitudes as morally right or wrong. Many well-meaning believers think that our attitudes and emotions are amoral, that is, that they are neither good nor evil. But Scripture demonstrates time and again that our feelings may be confirmed as morally right or denounced as morally wrong.

Because the bible teaches Christians to conform every aspect of their lives and being to God’s moral standards, Christian ethics must address not only behavior, but also emotions, orientations, predilections, inclinations, preferences, thoughts, imaginations, beliefs, and our very natures. For example, in Matthew 5:22 Jesus taught that:

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

And in Matthew 5:28 he added that:

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

In both these examples Jesus condemned as sinful the emotions and attitudes of the heart, whether or not they eventually motivated the person to action. In fact, he taught that these attitudes actually violate the same commandments that forbid the sinful actions.

And consider his description of the human heart in Mark 7:21-23:

For from within, from the heart of men, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, evil intentions, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from inside (Mark 7:21-23).

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

Following Scripture, we will also speak of morally good and evil persons. An evil behavior flows from an evil heart; an evil heart flows from an evil nature. For this reason, if we are to please God, it is not enough that our actions and attitudes be morally good. We must also be intrinsically good persons; we must have good natures.

Scripture addresses this aspect of our being in Romans 8:5-9 where Paul wrote:

Those who exist in accordance with flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh; but those who exist in accordance with the Spirit on the things of the Spirit... The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. It is not submitted to God's law, indeed it cannot be... But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you (Romans 8:5-9).

In short, all unbelievers “exist in accordance with the flesh.” Their natures are evil, and therefore their actions and attitudes are also evil. Paul identified the fallen nature as being the source of a mind that is hostile to God and that does not and cannot submit to God’s law.

In distinction from unbelievers, believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And when he wrote of those who live in accordance with the Spirit, he referred to the new natures believers have because the Holy Spirit indwells them. This means that believers have an antidote for the fallen nature and possess the ability to conform to God’s standard of ethics.

So, when we speak of Christian ethics as “Theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not,” we mean at least three things: First, God himself is the standard of ethics; he alone is the rule by which all right and wrong are measured. Second, all theology, even all of life, has ethical dimensions. Third, God’s moral standards hold us accountable in our actions, in the thoughts and inclinations of our heart, and in our very natures.

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

THREEFOLD CRITERIA

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

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

From the outset we see here that the *Westminster Confession* rightly admits that there is a sense in which unbelievers do things that God commands. More than this, it also acknowledges that unbelievers' actions can produce good and beneficial results for themselves and for others. In other words, in one sense, unbelievers can do things that resemble our definition of ethical living: actions that bring about the blessing of God. On this matter Scripture agrees. For example, in Matthew 7:9-11 the Lord spoke these words:

Is there some man among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? Therefore, if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

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

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

Even though we can applaud unbelievers when they outwardly conform to God's commands, we have to remember that they are not truly virtuous. They are not good

enough to please God or to earn the blessing of salvation. But, why is this? How can actions that outwardly conform to God's commands still be sinful?

As we will see, obedience to God's commands must be done with the proper motive. Second, it must be done according to the proper standard, according to the manner prescribed in Scripture. And third, it must be done with the proper goal in mind, namely to glorify God. In short, unless a work is done with the right motive, in conformity to the right standard and for the right goal, it is not a work that God will reward with blessings.

In the first place, let's take a closer look at the proper motive.

PROPER MOTIVE

Unless a work is done with the right motive, it is not a work that God will reward with blessings. First, it must proceed from a heart that is purified by faith. Second, actions must flow out of Christian love.

Faith

In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, "Works [that]... proceed not from a heart purified by faith... [are] sinful, and cannot please God." This criterion of the right motive is closely associated with the way our definition of Christian ethics focuses on good persons with good natures. As we have already said, only believers who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can do works that God rewards with blessings.

One reason for this is that only believers have hearts that are purified by faith. Here the *Confession* is speaking of God-given, saving faith that remains and grows within believers. It is the means of purification through which believers receive new and good natures. And it properly motivates believers to do good works. As James wrote in 2:14-20:

What profit is there ... if someone says he has faith but he does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... If faith has no works, it is dead... Are you willing to recognize ... that faith without works is useless? (James 2:14-20).

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

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

Without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to God must believe that he exists, and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

Unless our attempts to seek God's blessings are founded on faith, we cannot please God and therefore cannot be rewarded by him. In other words, without faith as one of our motives, we cannot do good works.

Paul's statement of this doctrine is perhaps the clearest and most succinct in all of Scripture. In Romans 14:23 he wrote:

Everything that is not from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

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

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

Love

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

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

Works and even spiritual gifts that produce beneficial results merit no reward if they are not motivated by love. And as we have already seen, things that do not merit reward are not good in God's eyes.

We see this concern also in the way that Jesus summarized God's revelation in Scripture in Matthew 22:37-40:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and most important commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

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

Love is an aspect of every law God requires us to obey, so that if we do not act in love, no work we do can conform to his standard. And what makes God's standard even harder to meet is that our love must be for both God and neighbor. Unbelievers do not love God; they are hostile to him. And as a result, they can never be motivated by love for God. In other words, they can never have the right motive. And because of this, they can never do anything that God considers, in an ultimate sense, to be good.

PROPER STANDARD

Besides pointing out that good works must flow from the right motives, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* also states that good works must conform to the right standard. Listen to the words of chapter 16, paragraph 7 again:

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

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

To introduce our approach to the right standard, we will touch on three matters: first, commands of Scripture; second, all of Scripture; and third, general revelation, creation itself.

Commands

In the first place all the commands of Scripture are designed to guide us. Listen to how John summarized this idea in 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who commits sin commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

Notice what John did not say. He did not simply teach that everyone who commits lawlessness commits sin, as if lawlessness were just one of many kinds of sin. Instead, he said that everyone who sins is guilty of lawlessness, meaning that all sin entails lawlessness. All sin violates God's Law.

John's words here are categorical and put the importance of the proper standard in the strongest terms possible. But today we must realize that even many Christians think it is possible that some violations of God's law are not sinful. Certain commands of God may be ignored. Well, the apostle James addressed this issue in 2:9-10 of his letter:

If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as disobedient. For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all the points (James 2:9-10).

Clearly some violations of the Law are sinful, such as showing favoritism, which James mentioned. But James then went on to say that to violate any particular stipulation of the Law was to violate every stipulation of the Law. Because the Law is a unified whole that reflects God's character and nature, to transgress any part of it is in some senses to transgress every part of it, and to sin against God himself. Therefore, if any violations of the Law are sinful, all violations of the Law are sinful.

Now, we will look into this matter more deeply in future lessons, but from the outset we must make a firm distinction here between the law of God and its application. From a biblical perspective, every law is still binding on followers of Christ. But the process of application is complex, so complex that obedience in one situation may look very different from obedience in another situation.

Now, we should emphasize that we are not advocating relativism. It is not true that the Bible means different things to different people and that all these meanings are equally valid. On the contrary, the Bible means what God says it means — what its original authors intended it to mean. God's Word is our binding norm, and we cannot vary from it. Therefore, we are justified in saying that all good works must conform to the standard of biblical law.

All Scripture

In the second place, the proper standard requires submission to the whole bible. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* does not just say that God's Law is a criterion of all good works, but that God's Word as a whole is a criterion of good works. That is to say, good works must be done according to the teaching of all revelation, especially Scripture, even according to those portions that are not formally part of the law. Consider for example that even the Law itself appeals to other portions of Scripture as the basis for its commands.

For instance, in the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath commandment appeals to the account of creation as the basis of its authority. In Exodus 20:9-11 we read:

You shall labor and do all your work for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, but on the seventh day he rested... For this reason the Lord blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Exodus 20:9-11).

At this point the Ten Commandments themselves establish their binding moral authority on the moral implications of the creation account.

Jesus did something similar when he defended the disciples' so-called Sabbath-breaking on the basis of David's behavior. Listen to the way he responded to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:3-4:

Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, along with those who were with him, how he entered the house of God ... and ate the consecrated bread, which only the priests are allowed to eat, and also gave some to those who were with him? (Matthew 12:3-4).

Jesus approved of David's actions and drew a moral application from them. And he did this even though the account of this event was not part of the legal code. So, we see that in the Bible not only is the Law treated as the standard for good works, but so are

the other portions. But this should not seem strange to us. After all, earlier in this lesson we read 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be fully qualified, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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

General Revelation

But we have also hinted that God's Word is even broader than Scripture. In a very important sense, God's revelation in the creation itself is part of his Word so that God's revelation given through creation, which is commonly called "general revelation," is also part of the standard for good works. One of the clearest places we find this idea in Scripture is Romans 1:20. There Paul wrote:

Since the world's creation, [God's] invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through the things that have been made, so that [men] are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

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

But the point is this: Men's actions are condemned because they violate the standards revealed by God's general revelation. Or to put it in the terms we have been using, general revelation is part of God's Word, and part of the criterion to which good works must conform. So, to recap what we have said, Scripture teaches that good works must conform to God's Word as it is revealed in the Law, in all of Scripture, and in creation.

PROPER GOAL

Besides needing to be properly motivated and to conform to the standard of God's Word, all good works must have the right end or goal. Now, good works may have any number of immediate goals. For instance, when parents earn money to pay for food, shelter, clothing, their immediate goal is to support themselves and their families. This is a good and admirable goal. But in our study of ethics, we are more interested in the ultimate goal of the works that people do.

If our works are to please God, immediate goals like caring for our families, obeying our parents, keeping the Sabbath and the like, must be part of a bigger picture. We must do these things because at our core we want to glorify God by living in a way that pleases him.

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

Whether you eat or drink or do anything else, do everything for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Paul understood that some immediate goals might make it good to eat, while different immediate goals might make it good to abstain from eating. His point was that there ought to be another principle overriding these immediate goals, namely, a concern for God's glory, and that unless this ultimate goal were in sight, neither eating nor abstaining could be considered good.

Peter made a similar point when he instructed his readers concerning the use of spiritual gifts. Listen to his words in 1 Peter 4:11:

If someone speaks, it is to be as the Word of God; if someone ministers, it is to be from the strength that God supplies; in order that in all things God may be glorified (1 Peter 4:11).

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

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

All things are from him and through him and to him. Glory to him forever! (Romans 11:36).

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

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

Now that we have established a biblical definition of Christian ethics and examined the threefold scriptural criteria for good works, we should apply these ideas by laying out the threefold process by which Christians should make ethical decisions.

THREEFOLD PROCESS

Throughout these lessons we will examine the practical steps that we should take when making ethical decisions time and again. At this point, however, we are in a position to sketch the basic contours of the approach that we will explain more fully in later lessons.

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

TENDENCIES

There are many different ways that believers try to make ethical choices in life, but they tend to fall into three main categories. Some emphasize our Christian conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit, insisting that actions are good if they accord with these internal indicators. Others emphasize Scripture, insisting that actions are good if they obey the dictates of Scripture, but bad if they do not. Still others emphasize the outcome of actions, insisting that actions are good if they produce good consequences, but bad if they produce bad consequences.

As we have seen, the Bible defines good works as those that are done with the right motive, by the right standard, and for the right goal. And in fact, these three criteria for good works correspond to the emphases we have just mentioned.

Those who emphasize conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit are primarily concerned with the right motive. We might say that they look first at the fact that good works can only be done by good persons. When it comes to ethical judgments, they tend to ask questions like: What is my attitude? Do I have the maturity to make the right decision? Do I have the spiritual capacity to apply God's Word to the situation?

Then there are those who make ethical decisions by focusing on the right standard. These people emphasize the dictates of Scripture. When faced with an ethical issue, their first question tends to be: What does God's Word say?

Finally, those who think mainly of the consequences of their actions are chiefly interested in the right goal. They focus on the situation itself, asking questions like: What is the problem? What issues are involved? What outcomes will result from the possible solutions to this problem?

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

PERSPECTIVES

Throughout these lessons we will speak of ethical judgments or decisions in this way:

Ethical judgment involves the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person.

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

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

Ethics must be approached in at least three different ways or from three different perspectives. Ethics should be done from the perspective of God’s Word, from the perspective of the situation, and from the perspective of the person. And biblically, the insights of all of these perspectives are valuable. Therefore, the best approach is to do ethics from all three perspectives and to let the insights from each perspective inform and influence the insights from the others.

We will speak of three perspectives or approaches toward every ethical judgment: the situational perspective, the normative perspective and the existential perspective. We will return to these perspectives many times in these lessons, but at this point we should look at the basic idea of each outlook.

Situational

When our ethical inquiries turn to the problems themselves, or to the consequences of actions, or to goals, we are doing ethics from the situational perspective. This approach may be called “teleological” because it focuses on the end or the result of actions. Approaching ethics from the situational perspective involves noting the relations of means to ends in God’s economy, asking questions like, what are the best means of achieving God’s purposes? It also includes appeals to moral behavior based on the prior example of God, Jesus, and other morally good characters in Scripture.

Scripture itself frequently adopts this perspective and encourages us to do the same when it instructs us on ethical topics by appealing to God’s sovereign, providential

control of his creation. This is particularly evident when it does so by referring to the events of redemption or by pointing to God, Jesus and others as models for our behavior. For example, in Romans 6:2-4, Paul argued that our death to sin and our burial with Christ took place in order that a specific end might be accomplished, namely, that we might live morally apart from sin:

We died to sin; how will we still live in it? ... We have been buried together with [Christ] ... in order that as Christ was raised from the dead ... so we also might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:2-4).

In so doing, he did not focus on the commandments of God or on the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and consciences but on the facts of the situation, including the events of redemption and the ends for which we were saved.

Paul also closed Romans chapter 6 with a situational perspective on ethics. He wrote these words in Romans 6:20-22:

When you were slaves of sin ... what benefit did you have then from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the result of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your benefit, leading to holiness, and the result is eternal life (Romans 6:20-22).

Paul encouraged his readers to live holy, moral lives and to abstain from the sins they once committed. Paul argued that by living holy lives, they would obtain eternal life. Here, he also argued on the basis of consequences, but this time he focused on the reward that would be given in response to godly living.

Peter also presented situational arguments for moral behavior. Listen to the way he argued in 1 Peter 2:21:

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

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

Normative

Perhaps the most intuitive perspective for Christians is what we call the normative perspective. Normative refers to the fact that God's Word is the norm, or standard, for ethics. We are doing ethics from the normative perspective when we look to the Bible to tell us what to do.

For example, in restoring proper worship to Israel, King Josiah instructed his people to keep the Passover. In 2 Kings 23:21 he commanded them:

Observe the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant (2 Kings 23:21).

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

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

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

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

Having now looked at the situational and normative perspectives, let's take a look at ethics viewed from the perspective of the person, which we will call the existential perspective.

Existential

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

So we see, then, that Scripture affirms our consciences and the leading of the Holy Spirit as valid means to determine what is right and wrong. Along with the situational and the normative perspectives, the existential perspective is a necessary tool for us as we seek to make ethical judgments.

Scripture contains many examples of this approach to ethics, such as in 1 John 3:21 where the apostle wrote:

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

His point was that as redeemed people our hearts are in tune with God's character, and if God's love abides within us, we will be able to intuit what is right and what is wrong. God moves within his people to bring them inward conviction of right and wrong. And

when we acknowledge this aspect in doing ethics, we are using the existential perspective.

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

Listen to his teaching in Galatians 5:16:

**Walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desire of the flesh
(Galatians 5:16).**

One legitimate way for believers to make ethical judgments is to heed the Spirit's inner prompting. And when we do this, we are viewing right and wrong from the existential perspective.

In Romans 14:5, 14, 23 Paul placed so much emphasis on the existential perspective that he insisted that to violate our consciences was sin, even though our consciences are not perfect.

**Each person must be fully assured in his own mind... I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. But to the one who thinks it to be unclean, to him it is unclean... The one who doubts is condemned if he eats, because it is not from faith
(Romans 14:5, 14, 23).**

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

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

Now that we have introduced the situational, normative, and existential perspectives in ethics, we should spend some time looking at the way these three perspectives interact with and depend on one another. The three different perspectives from which we may approach ethics are not separate constituent parts; rather, each perspective is the whole of ethics, viewed from one angle or another.

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

INTERDEPENDENCE

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

The same is true when we speak of the normative perspective. If we cannot apply the words of Scripture to our situations and selves, we really have not understood Scripture. Consider the man who says, "I know what 'You shall not steal' means, but I don't know how that applies to me or to my embezzling funds from my employer." This person certainly does not have an adequate concept of the words "You shall not steal." He claims to understand the normative requirements, but his failure to be able to comprehend a situational context to which these apply demonstrate that, in reality, he has little clue what the Bible requires.

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have introduced the subject of Christian ethics by defining it as the whole of theology viewed from its ethical aspects. We have also explained the Bible's threefold criteria for good works. Finally, we have suggested a biblical model for making ethical decisions that takes into account the benefits of emphasizing and balancing the normative, situational, and existential perspectives.

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

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
TWO

THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE:
GOD AND HIS WORD



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Two

The Normative Perspective: God and His Word

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

This lesson will divide into two main parts: We will look first at God himself as our absolute standard. And second, we will explore how God's Word serves as our

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

GOD AS STANDARD

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

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

GOD IN HIMSELF

There are many issues that could be addressed as we think of God himself as the absolute moral law. But for our purposes, we will touch on two matters: First, we will speak of goodness as a personal attribute of God. And second, we will look at the fact that God's goodness is the ultimate standard for all goodness.

Personal Attribute

In the first place, when we speak of goodness as a personal attribute of God, we mean that he himself is the standard by which all morality is measured. Although we sometimes speak abstractly about concepts of goodness and rightness, and although we can apply terms like good and right to impersonal objects and ideas, these concepts are rightly derived from something much more basic: the goodness of God's person. Apart from God's character, there can be no such thing as goodness or rightness. Ethical value exists only as a reflection of God. In a very real sense, he is not just good and right; he is goodness and rightness themselves.

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

God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not do

what is true. If we walk in the light, as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7, literal).

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

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

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

By saying that only God met the standard of goodness, Jesus indicated that he was speaking of perfect and total goodness rather than of relative or derivative goodness. After all, the Bible does call other people good. But God's goodness is different. Unlike all other goodness, it is perfect in quality, absolute in degree, and unique to the persons of the Trinity.

We find similar statements of God's supreme goodness throughout Scripture, such as in Psalm 5:4 where David declared:

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

And in Daniel 4:37 where even the Gentile King Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed:

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

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

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

In all these passages, we see God presented as the absolute moral law in two ways: 1) the Lord is set forth as the apex of perfection as a being who is totally without flaw; and 2) we, as the readers of Scripture, are encouraged to measure our own goodness against God's actions and character.

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

Ultimate Standard

In the second place, when we speak of God as the absolute moral Law, we also mean that there is no higher standard than God's person. God's goodness is the ultimate standard for all goodness.

Unfortunately, many people have the misconception that there is a definition of "good" against which God himself must be measured if he is to be called "good" and "right." For example, some people think that God cannot be good if he judges human beings. Others believe that a good God would never allow evil. And on the basis of these assumptions, they mistakenly conclude that the God of the Bible cannot rightly be described as "good."

Unfortunately, even though Christians reject this conclusion that God is not good, some believers wrongly accept the notion that there is a higher standard of goodness to which even God must conform himself.

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

Do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord... You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees (Psalm 119:65, 68).

In verse 65, the psalmist acknowledged that God's word was a standard for goodness and even indicated that God's own actions could be judged "good" by this standard. And in verse 68 he proclaimed that God was indeed good and that God's actions were good, implying that this was because God had acted according to his word. Finally, the psalmist closed verse 68 by expressing his desire to learn God's decrees, that is, God's law, in order that he might be conformed to God's goodness. In short, in these verses the psalmist measured God's actions by the standard of God's law and found God's actions to be good.

But the writers of Scripture also knew that the law is not external to God; rather, it is his self-expression. Consider, for example, that later in Psalm 119:137 and 142 the psalmist wrote:

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

God's law is right and good because it comes from God, who himself is right and good. Because he is righteous, everything he does and everything he expresses — including his law — manifests his goodness. So, even when biblical authors compared God to the standard of the law, their intention was simply to reflect on how the law expresses God's character.

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

GOD AS JUDGE

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

Now, it is true that God delegates to human beings some responsibility for making ethical judgments. For instance, according to the Scriptures, legitimate human governments are given limited responsibility to honor good and punish evil. But the Bible also teaches that our human judgments are only correct and valid insofar as they mirror God's judgments. Jesus himself made it clear that on the last day, God himself will judge all people by their actions, and thereby he will either confirm or condemn all the judgments that human beings have ever made. At that time, he will curse those whose works are evil, and he will bless those whose works are good.

John 5:27-30 record Jesus' words on this matter:

[The Father] has given [the Son] authority to judge... all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned... my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me (John 5:27-30).

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

Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? ... Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty... Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you (Job 40:2-14).

It is God's right to judge because he has absolute authority. And his judgments are inescapable because he has absolute power. Although God's creatures may wish to escape his authority and power, they cannot.

In the final analysis, there are only two options: either we submit ourselves to him as our judge seeking refuge in his mercy through Christ, or we defy him and suffer eternal punishment. And in case we are tempted to resent God and distrust his judgments, we should hasten to add that all of his determinations are just and right. He is not capricious, but always judges according to the immutable standard of his character. As Elihu argued in Job 34:10-12:

Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. He repays a man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves. It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice (Job 34:10-12).

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

With this basic understanding of God as both the absolute moral norm and the absolute judge of morality in mind, let's now turn our attention to some of the implications of these matters for our lives.

IMPLICATIONS

When we spoke of God as the absolute moral standard, we referred primarily to God's existence in and of himself. And as we spoke of God as the absolute judge of morality, we focused mainly on his interactions with his creation. At this point, we will turn our attention to the fact that God's power and authority to judge obligate his creatures to live according to the standard of his character.

You will recall, for example, that in 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter instructed his readers in this way:

As he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

In this passage, Peter affirmed what we have already said, namely, that God's character is the ultimate standard for all human behavior. But he also applied this idea by insisting that because God is the standard for all human behavior, mankind is consequently obligated to obey and to imitate God.

Of course, it's important to realize that when we speak of imitating God, we're not talking about blurring the distinction between the creator and the creature. Rather, we are speaking of our responsibility to reflect his character. For example, when Peter wrote that we are to be holy because God is holy, he meant that God's character dictates what holiness is, and that because God acts according to his holiness, we are also to act according to his holiness.

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

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

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

Now, to most of us, this application probably seems obvious. After all, if God is the absolute authority who holds us accountable to an absolute standard, then it must follow that we are obligated to obey that standard. In reality, however, many people who are confronted with God's sovereign authority and righteous standard disregard God's commands and invent their own rules for their lives.

Some believe that even if God has the power to judge them, he does not have the right. They may even believe that it is honorable and good to resist God, despite the consequences, much like one might resist an evil human dictator.

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

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

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

Having taken a closer look at the idea that God himself is the absolute ethical norm, we are now in a position to turn to our second main topic in this study of the normative perspective in ethics: the Word of God as our revealed ethical norm.

WORD AS STANDARD

We have looked at a number of ways in which the Bible demonstrates that God himself is our absolute ethical norm. But the fact of the matter is that we only know what God is like because he has revealed himself to us through his Word. Without this revelation, his character would be mysterious and unknown so that we would not be able to fulfill our obligation to follow his example. Fortunately, God's revelation teaches us many things about his character, enabling us to make informed ethical determinations that reflect this standard. So, while we insist that God himself is our ultimate norm, we must rely on his revelation or Word as our practical norm.

To explore how God's word is our revealed ethical norm, we will deal with three issues: First, we will touch on the three categories of revelation. Second, we will speak of the normative character of these three categories of revelation. And third, we will explore the unity of these three categories of revealed norms.

THREE CATEGORIES

In the first place, to move forward in our understanding of Christian ethics, we must come to grips with the fact that God has revealed himself in three ways.

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

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

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

NORMATIVE CHARACTER

We will look first at the normative aspects of God's Word found in general revelation, second at the norms of special revelation, and third at existential revelation as a revealed standard. Let's turn our attention now to the way God's general revelation serves as an authority over us.

General Revelation

When we speak of general revelation, we are concerned with the way creation and history tell us true things about God and his moral requirements of us. Of course, general revelation cannot teach us everything. For example, some things, such as the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, are taught only through special revelation, and still other aspects of God's will come to us primarily through existential revelation. Also, the Bible emphasizes the fact that when Adam and Eve fell into sin, the created world fell with them, so that nature has been corrupted. As a result, creation and history are hard to interpret; they no longer present us with a perfectly clear picture of God's character. Nevertheless, the Bible assures us that general revelation still speaks clearly enough to teach us true things about God, it reveals the perfect standard of God's character and thus serves as one of God's revealed norms.

We will speak of two important features of general revelation as it applies to Christian ethics: its complexity, and its importance.

Complexity. In the first place, general revelation is complex. It is common for Christians to think about general revelation in very simple terms as if every form of general revelation were alike. In reality, however, there are varying degrees of generalness and specialness within the category of general revelation. Some aspects of general revelation are common to all people, whereas others are restricted to very limited groups of people. Some aspects are rather vague in meaning, whereas others are particularly clear. Some aspects follow the natural order with very little indication of God's active, daily involvement, whereas others clearly demonstrate God's supernatural intervention.

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

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44-45).

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

On the other end of the spectrum, some general revelation is known by so few people that it appears to be very similar to special revelation. For instance, consider the history of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we have already said, history is part of general revelation. As we see what events God allows and how he governs the world throughout time, we learn a great deal about him. And the history of redemption, particularly of the work of Jesus Christ, tells us a tremendous amount about God, ourselves, and salvation.

Listen to the way Paul expounded the history of the resurrection in Acts 17:30-31:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

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

This type of general revelation is very similar to special revelation because it is rare and unusual. Not many people saw Jesus when he lived and died. And his life and death themselves were highly extraordinary; they were unlike any other human life or

death. His resurrection, in turn, was undeniably miraculous. Nevertheless, they do not reach the level of special revelation because they do not communicate how we are to repent or what total commitment to God fully entails.

Importance. In the second place, in Christian ethics we need to affirm the importance of general revelation to making ethical decisions. God holds all mankind accountable to recognize and conform to those aspects of his character that are revealed to them through creation and history.

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

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

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

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:18-20).

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

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

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

Here Paul called general revelation a “decree.” Other translations render this word as “ordinance” or “judgment.” The basic idea, however, is clear: general revelation is a revealed standard that is obvious to everyone and that God commands everyone to obey.

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

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

Paul was saying that even though general revelation speaks clearly to us, we reject its obvious meaning in favor of other meanings. Ancient unbelievers invented false gods. Modern unbelievers commonly attribute creation to chance. And even many Christians have become accustomed to think about the creation through the eyes of modern unbelief. Nevertheless, God's revelation in creation is still binding. It is still God's revealed standard to which we must conform.

Probably, Paul was drawing from Psalm 19 where David wrote in verse 1:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Psalm 19:1).

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

Having seen that general revelation comes in many forms and that all those forms reveal God's norms, we should look at special revelation as another revealed norm from God.

Special Revelation

Whether or not we find it easy to believe that general revelation is part of God's revealed standard for our lives, all Christians should easily recognize that special revelation is a norm that is binding on our lives. Just as we did with general revelation, we will focus on special revelation's complexity and importance to Christian ethics.

Complexity. In the first place, special revelation is complex, coming to us in a number of forms. Most of these forms rely on the spoken or written word, but all of them involve God communicating with people in ways that transcend the normal workings of creation. As we survey Scripture, we find many different examples of special revelation. In some cases God appears visibly and speaks audibly to groups or individuals. In other cases he is heard but not seen. At other times he communicates through a mediator such as an angel who appears to his people. God also commonly instructs those who have

received his special revelation to write down what has been revealed, and this written record is counted as Scripture, which is yet another form of special revelation.

Now, as varied as these different types of special revelation are, they are all “special” in a sense because they represent extraordinary or supernatural communication between God and man. They involve God interrupting, as it were, the natural course of events in order to communicate more directly with his people.

But even though these various types of revelation share this common bond, we can still distinguish between them because some come more directly from God with less mediation. Those that come through the more distant mediation are the least “special”; we may even think about them as bordering on general revelation. Those that come more directly from God, in turn, are the most “special.”

Moses spoke with God directly and personally. As we read in Exodus 33:11:

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

On the other end of the spectrum of special revelation we find things like dreams. The significance of special revelation in dreams lies not in the fact that the person dreams, but in the fact that God uses this natural phenomenon to communicate truth to the individual.

For instance, in Genesis 41 we find the account of Pharaoh’s dream of the seven lean cows that ate the seven fat cows. Certainly Pharaoh knew that the dream was supernatural, and this is proven by his appeal to his counselors to interpret it for him. But how did Pharaoh know his dream was supernatural? God did not directly address Pharaoh in the dream, or even send an angel to speak to him as he later did for Joseph in Matthew 1. The only thing special about Pharaoh’s dream was that God used it to communicate to Pharaoh. Apart from God’s use of the dream, this revelation was indistinguishable from dreams that occur as a normal part of general revelation.

In short, some special revelation is fantastic and obviously supernatural, such as God’s manifest presence with people like Moses. Other special revelation, however, closely resembles normal, natural human life.

In our day the most common form of special revelation (and the only universally acknowledged form of current revelation) is Scripture. And even Scripture itself has parts that are very special and other parts that are a bit more common. For example, according to Exodus 31:18, God directly wrote the Ten Commandments, which were contained on “tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.”

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

As some of your own poets have said, “We are [God’s] offspring” (Acts 17:28).

Here Paul affirmed the conclusions of the pagan poet, and thereby this pagan poet’s words became part of special revelation.

Other more common texts include certain proverbs collected by biblical writers, other quotes from pagan poets, and the copies of the letters between King Artaxerxes of Persia and his servants in the Trans-Euphrates region, which can be found in Ezra 4.

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

Importance. In the second place, all special revelation is important to Christian ethics because all special revelation is normative for us; all special revelation is a standard to which we must adhere. Consider, for example, that after Paul quoted the pagan poets Aratus and Cleanthes in Acts 17:28, he went on to draw an application from their words that is binding on all mankind. Listen to Acts 17:28-30:

As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:28-30).

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

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

Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon ... and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin (Jeremiah 25:8-9).

Because the people had refused to listen to God’s prophets, God threatened extreme covenant judgment against them, warning them that he would bring them to “everlasting ruin” if they failed to repent. When God reveals truth through his authoritative representatives such as the biblical prophets and apostles, this special revelation is absolutely binding.

Now, in our day, we no longer have living authoritative apostles and prophets. But we do have the Bible, which is binding on all people at all times. Because Scripture is the most relevant form of special revelation for us today, we will discuss it in greater detail in our next two lessons. For now, however, we should turn our attention to existential revelation, which is God’s revelation through human persons.

Existential Revelation

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

For example, listen to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 1, section 10:

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

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

We can call these human judgments forms of “existential revelation.” None is a simple presentation of history or creation, and none is a direct supernatural communication from God. Instead, each involves God’s revelation through human beings, whether as the joint theological conclusions reached by groups of people, or as the judgments of individuals, or as the inward leading and illumination of the Holy Spirit within believers. As we did with general and special revelation, we will speak of the complexity of existential revelation and then of its importance for Christian ethics.

In the first place, existential revelation may be divided into two main categories: what we might call the external aspects of existential revelation, and the internal aspects of existential revelation.

External. The external aspects of existential revelation include such things as: human existence; human judgment, both individual and corporate; and human behavior. We can think of *human existence* as a form of revelation because human beings are created in the image of God. That is to say, in some sense, we are each a replica or reflection of God. Human beings are the images that reflect God’s glory and dignity. And because we reflect his character, we can learn many things about God by looking at people.

Our second point, that individual and corporate human judgment is a form of existential revelation, is closely related to the fact that we are created in God’s image. Listen to the way Moses recorded the history of the creation of mankind in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the

livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

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

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

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name (Genesis 2:19).

This is the first example we find in Scripture of man exercising the authority that God delegated to us. And whatever else we may say about this example, it is at least true that when Adam named the animals he was thinking and exercising judgment. So, it is fair to say that when human beings think and judge in an exercise of divinely delegated authority, we are reflecting God’s character.

And this is precisely the type of activity to which the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is referring when it speaks of “councils ... ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits.”

For example, in Acts 15 we read that the church leaders met in Jerusalem in order to render judgment regarding the practices of Gentiles who converted to Christianity. The council, which was attended and supported by apostles such as Peter and Paul, sent a letter explaining its determinations to the various churches then in existence. In Acts 15:28-29 Luke records that their letter included the following words:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:28-29).

Notice that the Jerusalem council claimed to be speaking for itself as well as for the Holy Spirit. Their understanding was that God could use their joint deliberations in order to determine the proper course of action for the church. This is not to say that church councils are infallible but merely to point out that we have a biblical precedent for believing that God uses his corporately gathered people in order to reveal truth.

This is also the case when the church meets in smaller groups. Consider, for example, Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:16, 20:

Every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses... Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:16, 20).

Jesus taught that whenever two or three Christian witnesses rightly confirm a matter of church discipline, Jesus supports their exercise of the authority that he has delegated to the church. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that when Christians in smaller groups meet and render judgments, their judgments are not infallible, but it is still accurate to say that God uses individual and corporate judgments to guide his people into truth.

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

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

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

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

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

[Jesus asked,] "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:15-17).

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

Of course, Peter was also confronted with Jesus himself, and his personal knowledge of Jesus was part of the process by which he came to understand that Jesus was the Christ. But many others who did not come to this understanding were also confronted with Jesus. The difference was that the Holy Spirit worked within Peter to bring him to this understanding.

Paul addressed the issue of the illumination of believers rather directly in 1 Corinthians 2 where he wrote these words in verses 11 and 12:

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2:11-12).

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

It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ ... to believe on him (Philippians 1:29).

The Greek word here translated "granted" means "given freely." Paul's point is not that the Philippians were granted the opportunity to believe, but rather that God gave to them as a free gift their very faith in Jesus.

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

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law ... they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts ... their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (Romans 2:14-15).

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

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

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

Notice that Paul was not here speaking of what we know or believe, but rather of what we will or desire, of what motivates our actions. This too is a form of revelation

because it communicates impressions and intuitions about God's character to us. And just as with all forms of existential revelation, because it reveals God's character, it is a binding standard that we must obey and to which we must conform.

We have looked at the three categories of God's revelation, and we have seen how all of God's revelation provides us with norms that reveal the character of God. For now, however, we will explore the unity of these three categories of revealed norms.

UNITY

General, special, and existential revelation are all intimately related. All reveal the same God and therefore all reveal the same standard, and all are binding and authoritative. But what does this mean for us as we try to make biblical decisions? As you will recall, our model for biblical decision making is: "Ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person." In light of this model, the unity of God's general, special and existential revelation indicates that we should inform all our ethical judgments by all the revelation available to us. Of course, Scripture is entirely sufficient to instruct us regarding Christian ethics. General and existential revelation do not give us new information about God's character that is not contained in Scripture. But we will understand what Scripture teaches us much more clearly when we compare it to all the rest of God's revelation. In fact, without the general revelation of books and language, we would not even have access to the special revelation of Scripture. And of course, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, existential revelation, is critical to our comprehending the message of Scripture. Therefore, using all forms of God's revelation provides great insight to us as we apply Scripture to life.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored two aspects of the normative perspective in Christian ethics. We have seen that God himself is the ultimate standard for all ethical behavior and that his character obligates all human beings to imitate him. We have also seen that God himself is unknowable apart from his Word or revelation, so that we must receive his revelation in all of its forms as our revealed or practical standard.

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

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
THREE

THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE:
THE ATTRIBUTES OF SCRIPTURE



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Three

The Normative Perspective: The Attributes of Scripture

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 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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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
FOUR

THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE:
PARTS AND ASPECTS OF
SCRIPTURE



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Four

The Normative Perspective: Parts and Aspects of Scripture

INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine recently bought a bicycle for his son. The bicycle required some assembly — things like attaching the wheels and pedals. But there weren't any instructions for assembling the bicycle. Now, my friend knew what a bicycle should look like and how it should work, so he was still able to put it together. But imagine what would have happened if he had never seen a bicycle before. In that case, he might not have been able to assemble it properly.

In some ways, the Bible is like a box of bicycle parts without instructions. Just as it is relatively easy to put together things that are familiar, it is also relatively easy to discover some basic things about the Bible's meaning and proper use. On the other hand, just as it is difficult to put together complicated devices without instructions, it is hard to apply the Bible to complicated ethical questions when we do not understand Scripture's finer workings.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled this lesson "The Normative Perspective: Parts and Aspects of Scripture." As we have stated throughout these lessons, ethical judgment always involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. And this has led us to speak of three essential considerations in making biblical decisions: the proper standard of God's Word, which we have associated with the normative perspective on ethics; the proper goal, which accords with the situational perspective; and the proper motive, which corresponds to the existential perspective.

In this lesson we will look for a third time at the normative perspective, exploring the process by which we discern ethical standards in the Bible. And we will be focusing our attention on the different ways the various parts and aspects of Scripture communicate God's norms to us.

We will divide our discussion of the parts and aspects of Scripture into three main parts: First, we will look at the variety of materials we find in Scripture. Second, we will look more closely at the books and passages that comprise God's law in Scripture. And third, we will address the unity of Scripture that draws all of the parts and aspects of the Bible together. Let's begin with the variety we find in Scripture.

VARIETY OF SCRIPTURE

Anyone who has read much of the Bible should recognize that Scripture is not uniform. It contains histories, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, correspondence, and all sorts of other writings. And within each of these writings, we find even further variety. After all, each author wrote in his own way, and his writing itself varied throughout his work.

Sometimes he gave commands; sometimes he explained details; sometimes he recalled a personal experience. And this variety is not accidental. God has ordained each portion of the Bible to contribute in its own way to the standards of Christian ethics. Now, because Scripture communicates in so many different ways, it is not sufficient for us simply to know what the Bible says. We also need to know how the Bible communicates so that when we read what it says, we understand what it means.

The variety we find in the Bible can be described in many different ways, and no single way is comprehensive. But to give a sense of this dimension of Scripture and its implications for Christian ethics, we will touch on three matters: First, we will speak of the variety of language employed in the Bible. Secondly, we will speak of the variety of literature in the Bible. And third, we will look at the implications of this variety for modern ethical teaching. We will begin by looking at the smaller and simpler matters related to language and then move on to the larger and more complex issues of literature.

LANGUAGE

In the first place, the Bible displays the full range of language that we find in all human communication. It contains statements, questions, promises, offers, curses, blessings, threats, judgments quotations, summations, commands, advice, requests, exclamations, descriptions, cries of despair, expressions of desire and admiration and love, and much, much more. Biblical language can be emotionally reserved or emotionally charged. Some of it is quite imaginative, using symbolism and other figures of speech, while other language is relatively unimaginative, expressing matters in a more direct manner. The Bible includes both sarcasm and sincere language. It employs innuendos and allusions as freely as it provides explicit comments. It uses hyperboles and understatements and colloquialisms. And many times it doesn't even bother to state the obvious, but instead merely assumes it.

This tremendous variety of language presents us with a number of challenges when we read the Bible. After all, if we do not know how to recognize these different types of language, and if we don't understand how each one communicates, we are very likely to misunderstand the Bible's teachings.

Now, over the ages, Christians have proposed many ways of dealing with the challenges presented by the Bible's variety of language. But it is safe to say that most of these solutions have fallen into one of two groups: those that believe the Bible uses language in extraordinary ways, and those that believe the Bible uses language in ordinary ways.

Extraordinary

Often, those who believe that the Bible speaks in extraordinary ways offer solutions that ignore the different types of language in the Bible. Instead, they oversimplify biblical language in order to develop a system of interpretation that can be applied fairly equally to all of Scripture.

For example, in the Middle Ages many theologians believed that because the Bible is inspired by God, it communicates in extraordinary ways that exceed human comprehension. In their thinking, every biblical text possessed a variety of symbolic meanings that were sometimes hidden even from the authors of Scripture. Under this system, every text was assumed to have at least some metaphoric meaning, regardless of the human author's intentions.

More recently, many Christians who believe that Scripture's language is extraordinary have gone in the opposite direction. Instead of believing that the extraordinary nature of Scripture makes it hard to interpret, they have insisted that Scripture's extraordinary nature makes its language easy to interpret. Some of these have argued that the Holy Spirit directly reveals true interpretations to his people, so that it is unnecessary to know what type of language one is reading, let alone how it normally communicates meaning. Others have argued that Scripture's language should always be interpreted as literally as possible, so that metaphoric meanings are only sought when non-figurative meanings do not make good sense.

For example, it is apparent that in ordinary communication human beings commonly use hyperboles, or overstatements. But many Christians who are committed to biblical authority do not acknowledge that hyperboles appear in the Bible. Instead, they treat every statement in Scripture as if it were straightforward, detached, and precise.

In ordinary speech and writing, we often summarize matters, expecting our audiences to fill in the gaps with other knowledge they have. Yet, some Christians find it difficult to acknowledge that inspired writers did the same thing. Instead, they treat passages as if they were utterly comprehensive, rather than limited in their scope.

Beyond this, we recognize that in ordinary writing and speech, we will often be sarcastic and say just the opposite of what we mean. Yet, many believers find it hard to accept that sarcasm appears in the Bible.

In contrast to these opinions that Scripture's language is extraordinary, is the view that the Bible communicates in ordinary human language, using all the normal conventions of human communication.

Ordinary

You will recall that in a prior lesson, we spoke of the clarity of Scripture by which we meant that the Bible is not obscure, that 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. In other words, Scripture is clear only if it speaks in ordinary language and communicates in normal ways.

To demonstrate that the bible communicates in ordinary human language, let's consider a couple passages where an overly literal reading would be terribly misleading. Think about the petition in Matthew 6:11, which is part of the Lord's Prayer:

Give us today our daily bread (Matthew 6:11).

When this verse is read in an artificially literal way apart from the conventions of normal human expressions, it looks like Jesus commanded God to give him bread.

In fact, all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer take the form of imperatives, including not only "Give us today our daily bread," but also "deliver us from the evil one." And it is true that in Greek grammar, imperatives are often commands.

This fact has led some Christians who read the Bible in an overly literal way to conclude that Jesus' words were commands to God. And of course, since the Lord's Prayer is a model that we are to follow in our own prayers, they have also concluded that we have the right to issue commands to God!

But from the rest of Scripture, including Jesus' own words in the Lord's Prayer, we know that imperative verbs are frequently used to express petitions and requests. The same is also true in English. For instance, we say, "Pass the bread, please." Or "Help me, please!" These statements are imperatives. But when we say these words, we are not ordinarily issuing commands. Consider also Amos 4:4, where the prophet said this:

Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more (Amos 4:4).

An overly literal reading of these words has led some interpreters to think that Amos actually wanted his listeners to sin against the Lord at the idolatrous worship centers in Bethel and Gilgal. But this kind of reading is unnatural and does not account for the prophet's intentions revealed in other statements. For example, in Amos 5:5 the prophet said:

Do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal (Amos 5:5).

From this verse and from the rest of the book of Amos, we should conclude that when the prophet ordered the people to sin at Bethel and Gilgal, he spoke sarcastically, meaning just the opposite of what he said. He didn't want them to sin in these places, but to stop sinning in them.

The mechanics of the Bible's language are not unique to Scripture. Instead, the Bible uses the linguistic conventions of its authors and their original audiences. This means that if we are to interpret the Bible responsibly, we have to learn how they ordinarily used language, and we have to understand what each author's intent was when he wrote. If the author designed his words to be understood metaphorically, then we should read them metaphorically, searching the text for the meaning the author intended. On the other hand, if the biblical author crafted his words plainly and directly, then our responsibility is to interpret his words in a non-figurative way.

LITERATURE

Just as there are many varieties of language in Scripture, there are also many varieties of literature. These are larger, more complex forms than language, and they are somewhat more difficult to master. But understanding them is central to handling the various parts and aspects of Scripture responsibly.

There are many different forms or genres of literature in Scripture. To name only a few, biblical literature includes: prose, poetry, song, law, narrative, letter, vow, epistle, prophetic oracle, proverb, parable, and drama. And within these broader forms, there are

often multiple smaller categories. For instance, within the literary form of prophetic oracle, we find oracles of judgment, oracles of blessing, oracles patterned after lawsuits, and so on. These forms are distinguished by their content as well as by their structure, style, and use of language. Moreover, each biblical genre communicates meaning in various ways. So, just as we must be aware of the complexities of language in the Bible, we also need to be aware of the complexities of various literary forms.

Usually when we do ethics, we focus on passages in the Bible that contain laws or that directly teach moral standards and obligations. And these passages are certainly important to our study of ethics. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that the other genres have little or nothing to offer in the way of ethical instruction. For our purposes, we should note that biblical narratives also communicate ethical rules and regulations. Poetry and songs express ethical concerns. Proverbs and other wisdom writings reflect on ethical values. Prophecy expresses God's ethical judgments in the form of pleasure or displeasure toward human actions.

In fact, as we saw in our earlier lessons, every passage in the Bible reveals God's character, and thus every passage contains ethical teaching, whether that passage is a legal code, or a letter, or a poem, or a collection of proverbs, or a historical narrative, or any other type of literature. For this reason, when we do ethics we need to search all types of biblical literature for their revelations of God's ethical standards.

To illustrate the idea that all genres found in Scripture should guide our ethical reflections, let's consider the case of biblical narratives. Certainly the biblical writers were interested in recording historical facts. But they were also interested in using those facts to elicit faith and to teach moral lessons. We will mention five specific ways in which historical narratives contribute to our study and practice of Christian ethics.

First, on a very basic level, biblical narratives obligate us to accept their factual content. We are morally obligated to believe that the details of redemptive history are true. This is especially true when it comes to the central events of the gospel, such as Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But it is also true with regard to every other fact Scripture teaches us through historical narratives. The mere presentation of these facts in biblical narratives obligates us to believe them.

The second reason that biblical narratives are important to Christian ethics is that biblical history has the power to transform us ethically. That is to say, knowing the content of biblical history is part of becoming a Christian.

As we saw in our first lesson, only good people are capable of doing good things. And only those who have genuine saving faith in the gospel are good people. Of course, in order for us to have saving faith in Christ, we must know who Christ is and what he has done. And these are facts we learn from the Bible's historical record. So, knowing some Biblical history is necessary if we are to have saving faith in Christ. And therefore it is fair to say that knowing some biblical history is necessary if we are to behave ethically.

Third, biblical narratives provide the historical setting for God's laws. To understand the law of God properly, we must understand the historical context in which the law was given. For example, we must see that biblical narratives emphasize God's grace in order to motivate us to obey his law. Even the Ten Commandments begin in this way. As we read in Exodus 20:2, God began by saying:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

This short historical statement introduced the Ten Commandments, and provided a central motivation to obey them. In fact, striving to obey them without the motivation of gratitude will never lead to true obedience to the commandments. After all, as we saw in a prior lesson, all good acts must have good motivations.

So, biblical narratives are important for ethics because we can only understand God's laws properly when we understand biblical history.

Fourth, biblical narratives present God's evaluation of historical events. And because God's evaluations are always correct, they provide us with firm ethical guidance.

You will recall that we have defined "good" as that which God blesses, and "evil" as that which he curses or punishes. Well, in biblical narratives, writers illustrate the kinds of actions, thoughts, and motivations that God blesses and curses. By doing so, they provide their readers with examples to follow and to reject.

Finally, on occasion the writers of biblical history recorded their own ethical comments. Sometimes these comments are subtle, but other times they are quite blatant. For example, in Genesis 13:12-13 Moses made this comment about the people of Sodom:

Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord (Genesis 13:12-13).

Moses' moral evaluation of Sodom not only calls Lot's wisdom into question, but also anticipates the justice that God would soon bring to the city.

As God's inspired spokesmen, the authors of biblical historical records commented on the goodness or evil of many of the characters, attitudes, and events in their stories. Their evaluations represent the outlooks of God himself and therefore provide us with many ethical considerations.

So, what are the implications of using all the Scriptures as our ethical standard? In the first place, what we have seen about historical narratives is also true of other types of biblical literature: every type of literature is normative; every type of literature teaches us something about the way we should think, act and feel. And as a result, every passage in the Bible places moral obligations on us.

For instance, biblical poetry often focuses on appropriate emotional expression, and it frequently describes God's approval and disapproval. Prophecy demonstrates God's satisfaction or anger with human behavior. It also reveals many good things to do to gain God's favor, and warns against sinful things that will incur his wrath. Wisdom literature explains God's character, which is our ultimate ethical norm, and it teaches us how to apply the principles of the law to practical Christian living. Even when ethical considerations are not stressed in a passage, they can always be inferred.

Consider again Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

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).

Paul insisted that all Scripture, regardless of literary genre, equips Christians to please God. Moreover, since every passage of Scripture is relevant to ethics, it is legitimate to focus on the moral aspects of any given passage — even if the biblical author did not emphasize the moral aspect himself. In short, if we ignore the ethical implications of any portion of Scripture, we cut ourselves off from the full scope of ethical guidance offered in God’s revelation.

IMPLICATIONS

Now, the fact that Scripture uses so many types of language and literature to teach us about ethics has some interesting implications for the way we teach ethics today. For one thing, Scripture’s variety implies that our own teaching of ethics might benefit from using different genres.

It is true that direct ethical instruction helps us understand many things. But something is also lost when we rely entirely on straightforward instruction. Simple statements often do not touch our emotions in the same way that poetry and narratives do, just as the plain ethical instructions in Scripture are rarely as moving or memorable to us as the Psalms or the stories about Jesus. The situations explored in typical ethics lectures are seldom as subtle as those in narratives. And simple statements rarely move us to ponder moral issues the way proverbs do.

So, at times it may be helpful to teach and preach ethics in the various forms of language used by Scripture itself. In some settings, our teachings on ethical decision making will be more effective if we use our own poetic imagery, stories, proverbs, parables, and other genres that are not usually associated with ethics.

So, as we think specifically about Christian ethics, we need to remember that all the varieties of language and literature in Scripture are normative. And we also need to pay special attention to the different ways in which each type of language and literature communicates ethical instruction. Only by handling each type appropriately can we properly understand its ethical teachings.

Now that we have introduced how the different forms of language and literature in the Bible guide us in our use of Scripture as our moral standard, we should turn our attention to God’s law in Scripture, to those portions of the Bible that address ethics most explicitly.

GOD’S LAW IN SCRIPTURE

In Christian and Jewish traditions, the five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy — are known collectively as “the Law.” But when

we speak of God's law in these lessons, we will not be referring primarily to the books of Moses but to those portions of Scripture that are written in the literary form of a legal code. Those portions are found primarily in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. But those books also contain historical narrative, poetry, lists and other portions that are not part of their legal code. Moreover, some portions of the legal code are found outside the books of Moses.

Now, as we have said, God's law is not the only part of Scripture that contains normative ethical instruction. All Scripture is normative. But the law contains the clearest and most explicit expressions of many of God's ethical requirements, and has traditionally served well as a starting place for ethical investigation.

Our look into God's law will divide into two sections: First, we will explain the importance of the Ten Commandments, which are the foundational commandments in God's law. And second, we will introduce the three different types of God's law that theologians have traditionally recognized. Let's begin by turning our attention to the Ten Commandments.

TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are listed in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. Various theological traditions enumerate the commandments differently, but in these lessons we will follow the traditional Protestant numbering. The Ten Commandments may be summarized as follows:

- Commandment 1: You shall have no other gods before me.
- Commandment 2: You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- Commandment 3: You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Commandment 4: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
- Commandment 5: Honor your father and your mother.
- Commandment 6: You shall not murder.
- Commandment 7: You shall not commit adultery.
- Commandment 8: You shall not steal.
- Commandment 9: You shall not give false testimony.
- Commandment 10: You shall not covet.

Although some theologians treat the Ten Commandments as if they were just another portion of the Mosaic Law, the Bible indicates that the Ten Commandments have a special primacy over Scripture's other commandments.

The primacy of the Ten Commandments is both historical and theological. Their historical primacy depends on the fact that, to our knowledge, these laws were the first written legal code that was received by the nation of Israel. Paul called special attention to this fact in Galatians 3:17 where he wrote these words:

The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God (Galatians 3:17).

Paul referred to the giving of the Ten Commandments as the “introduction” of the law, indicating that this was the first time Israel had possessed God’s law in this form. Israel received the Ten Commandments through Moses, who himself received the Ten Commandments directly from God on Mount Sinai. By receiving the Ten Commandments, Israel became the first nation to possess an extensive, supernaturally revealed code of God’s holy requirements.

Of course, God’s people still had many commandments prior to Moses’ time. We see very clearly in the Flood of Noah’s day that God had a number of standards that he expected people to follow. And when the people failed to obey God, he destroyed the whole planet with the floodwaters. Moreover, Abraham was not without laws and stipulations to obey. In Genesis 17:1, God had given him the broad and demanding instruction:

Walk before me and be blameless (Genesis 17:1).

Now, the Ten Commandments were not the only laws given to Israel as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. But they served as the preliminary and summary statement for a great number of laws that Israel received immediately afterward while they were still camped at Mount Sinai. These other laws, commonly known as the Book of the Covenant, can be found in Exodus 21–23. Together with the Ten Commandments, the Book of the Covenant formed Israel’s initial written legal code. Later, this code was expanded to include many other laws.

In addition to having a temporal primacy, the Ten Commandments also had theological or ideological primacy. As we read in Exodus 24:12:

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction” (Exodus 24:12).

For one thing, unlike the book of the covenant that Moses penned according to the book of instructions, God himself wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. Deuteronomy 9:10 confirms that God himself carved the Ten Commandments in the stone tablets. There Moses claimed:

The Lord gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God (Deuteronomy 9:10).

By carving the Ten Commandments himself, God demonstrated that the Ten Commandments were special among his laws, that they deserved special attention and notice, and were, in some sense, the most important of his commandments.

The theological primacy of the Ten Commandments is also indicated by the special occasion on which Israel received them. The giving of the law was attended by thunder and lightning, smoke, clouds, and heavenly trumpets. During this time, God allowed himself to be viewed not only by Moses, but also by Joshua, Aaron, and the seventy elders of Israel.

The Ten Commandments' theological primacy is also emphasized in Deuteronomy 4:13 where Moses identified the Ten Commandments as God's very covenant with his people:

[God] declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets (Deuteronomy 4:13).

Beyond this, according to Exodus 40:20, The Ten Commandments were also placed within the Ark of the Covenant, God's footstool, which was the religious object most closely associated with God's presence with Israel. The Book of the Covenant and the rest of the laws did not receive this special recognition. For instance, in Matthew 19:17-19, we read the following discussion between Jesus a man who asked him how to inherit eternal life:

Jesus replied ... "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 19:17-19).

The laws that Jesus listed were from the Ten Commandments, except for the instruction on loving neighbors, which is from Leviticus 19:18 and which summarizes the laws Jesus mentioned from Ten Commandments. In short, Jesus indicated that by obeying the Ten Commandments, a person can earn eternal life. Of course, Jesus also taught that no one is good enough to obey these commandments. But the point for our discussion is that Jesus confirmed the importance of the Ten Commandments in a very remarkable way. Even in the New Testament, the Ten Commandments were still spoken of in terms that reflected their theological primacy.

The historical and theological primacy that the Bible gives to the Ten Commandments has also been recognized and reflected in Christian and Jewish traditions throughout history. For example, synagogues commonly display symbols of the Ten Commandments. And the two stone tablets of the Commandments are extremely common in Christian iconography, as well. Beyond this, the commandments have also been a vital part of Christian liturgy. In short, for many centuries Christian and Jewish traditions have agreed that this portion of God's law holds a special primacy over Scripture's other ethical instructions.

Now that we have seen the importance and priority that the Scriptures place on the Ten Commandments, we should turn our attention to the three traditional categories, or types of law, that we find in Scripture.

THREE TYPES OF LAW

In most protestant branches of the church, it has been common to categorize the various laws in the Old Testament Bible into three major groups: moral law, ceremonial

law, and civil law. Moral laws are typically thought to convey God's ethical standards and are usually identified with the Ten Commandments. Civil laws provide for the governing of society, especially during the period of Israel's theocracy. Ceremonial laws, in turn, are those which provide instruction for worshipping God. Frequently, these are most closely associated with the Old Testament sacrificial system, and Tabernacle and Temple administration.

These distinctions have played such an important role in the history of the church that we will look at them more carefully, first addressing some important qualifications of the traditional divisions; second, affirming the value of these divisions; and third, discussing the proper application of the traditional categories of law to the study of ethics. Let's think first about some qualifications of the threefold division of the Old Testament laws.

Qualifications

Although there are many positive things that can be said about the traditional threefold division of the law, categorizing the laws in Scripture is not without its challenges. In the first place, most biblical scholars rightly notice that the three traditional categories are not taught explicitly in the Bible. That is, nowhere in Scripture do we find any definitive statement that there are distinct types of laws known as moral, ceremonial and civil, let alone instructions explaining which laws belong in which categories. Now, these categories have validity in many ways, but we must not think of them as obvious or clear in every respect.

In the second place, Scripture rather plainly presents some laws as belonging to more than one category. For example, in Exodus 20:8-11, the command to observe Sabbath is explicitly set within the Ten Commandments, the moral law. Yet, the Sabbath commandment is also set within a collection of Israel's worship ceremonies in Exodus 31:14-16.

Scripture also rather explicitly identifies the commandment forbidding murder as both moral and civil. This commandment is also one of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:13, marking it as a moral law. But the Old Testament also made it clear that government was to punish murderers, making murder a civil matter too.

So, as we look at Old Testament laws, we must be aware that many laws clearly fall into more than one division. In fact, it is safe to say that all the laws in the Old Testament had moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects.

Think about it this way. No matter what may appear most prominently in a particular text, every law was a standard of morality; every law had a direct or indirect bearing on social relations that were regulated by civil laws; and in one way or another, observances and violations of all laws affected the manner in which the people of Israel participated in the ceremonies of worship. For this reason, it is often better to speak of different "aspects" of laws rather than placing each law into one of the divisions of the law.

Despite these qualifications, we should also be aware that the traditional threefold division has substantial value when it comes to understanding how God intended his law to apply to his people.

Value

In the first place, the traditional threefold division helps us see more clearly that the Law was God's comprehensive standard for his people's lives. The law did not just regulate a small portion of life; it regulated all of life. This is evident because the traditional threefold division of the law reflects a genuine distinction that Scripture draws between the three offices that governed Israel's theocracy, namely, those of prophet, priest and king. Moral law corresponds closely to the prophetic office, which sets forth God's command for righteousness. Ceremonial law fits well with the priestly office since it pertains directly to functions carried out by priests, such as expiation. And civil law is closely related to the office of king, the governing head of the covenant people of God.

In the second place, this threefold distinction helps us interpret laws the Bible does not fully explain. By grouping similar laws together, theologians are better able to determine the original meaning and application of many laws about which the Bible says very little. After all, when the Bible gives us extensive information about applying one law but very little about a similar law, it is reasonable to use the insights from the first to inform our understanding of the second.

Now that we have looked at some qualifications of the traditional division of the law and emphasized its value for understanding Scripture, we should turn our attention to our third concern: the proper application of the traditional threefold division of law to the study of ethics.

Application

Although many theologians agree on the validity of the traditional categories of Old Testament law, they often disagree on how to apply these categories to the study of ethics. Some have said that whole categories of laws don't apply to modern Christians. In their understanding, the existence of these categories, and the proper identification of laws, provides a mechanism by which they can avoid applying God's Word to their lives. Other theologians have said that all the individual laws still apply, but only with regard to some of their aspects. Still others have argued that the traditional categories simply help us to see how each aspect of each law should be applied in the life of every Christian.

Consider, for example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith's* statement in chapter 19, section 3:

All ... ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the new testament.

This statement reflects the fact that since the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ, God's people are no longer to perform many of the specific behaviors that were required under the Mosaic sacrificial and temple system. We are no longer to maintain the temple, or to restrict women and Gentiles from access to God's holy presence, or to sacrifice animals for our sin.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* makes a similar statement with regard to civil law, but allows that the general equity, or basic moral principles, of civil laws continue to apply. It speaks of Israel's civil laws in chapter 19, section 4 where it states:

To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Again, the basic idea here is that the specific requirements of the civil laws no longer apply; they have “expired.”

Now, it is true that believers no longer have to behave in many of the ways specified in the Old Testament, especially with regard to laws that pertain to Old Testament ceremony and civil government. These behaviors have been superseded by the fuller revelation of the New Testament. The civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament really have “expired” in the sense that we are not to return to Old Testament patterns of life.

But it is critical to realize that in another sense the Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws still apply to modern Christians. The civil and ceremonial laws still guide us as God's standard today, just as the moral laws do.

There are at least four reasons that Christians should still look to the civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, as well as to its moral laws, for ethical guidance today.

First, God's character requires us to learn from the revelation these laws provide. As we have already seen, God's character is our ultimate standard for ethics. And the Old Testament law reflects God's character; it is a revelation of who God is and what he is like. And God's character has not changed. This means that everything the Law revealed about God in the Old Testament continues to be true today. In short, the Old Testament's civil and ceremonial laws still reveal our moral standard.

Second, Scripture itself teaches the continuing modern application of every Old Testament law, down to the last one. For example, in Matthew 5:18-19 Jesus gave this teaching:

Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:18-19).

According to Jesus, every law will continue to reveal God's standard until “everything is accomplished.” But everything is not accomplished yet — Christ has not yet returned. Until he does, even the least of the commandments is to be taught and observed. So, in one way or another, even the civil and ceremonial laws continue to teach us God's norms for our lives.

Third, the stubborn fact is that the Bible consistently teaches that the law is a unified whole, that it all stands together, without regard to distinctions between ceremonial, civil or moral divisions. For example, in James 2:10-11 we read these words:

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).

In the mind of James, the law was indivisible because it all came from the same God.

Fourth, all of Scripture, not just some parts, is for our moral instruction. This means that the ceremonial and civil laws as well as the moral laws have something to teach us about modern ethics. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16:

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

Note that Paul did not list any exceptions here. On the contrary, he included “all Scripture.” This means that even the ceremonial and civil laws are useful for training us in the ways of righteousness.

Now, realizing that the civil and ceremonial laws are still part of our ethical standard in Christian ethics is an important first step. But it is also important to know how to include these types of law in our ethical evaluations. After all, we have already established that we are not simply to continue Old Testament behaviors with regard to these laws. So, what are we supposed to do with these laws? What process of application should we follow?

Throughout this series of lessons we have emphasized that ethical decisions always involve the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person. As a result, the standard of any law, whether it emphasizes moral, civil, or ceremonial aspects, cannot be properly understood or applied without considering both the situation to which it is applied and the person who applies it. And whenever the details of the situation or the person change, we can expect the application of God’s Word to be at least somewhat different.

For the sake of illustration, it will help to consider a test case from the Old Testament in which a civil law was applied to a historical situation. So, consider the case of Zelophehad’s daughters who are mentioned in Numbers 27. According to the law that God had given earlier regarding the distribution of the Promised Land, allotments were to be distributed to families, and they were to be divided among the sons. Now, Zelophehad was a man who had died in the wilderness leaving five daughters but no sons. According to the law of property distribution that God had commanded, Zelophehad’s daughters could not inherit their father’s land. So, the daughters appealed to Moses. We read their petition in Numbers 27:3-4:

Our father died in the desert... and left no sons. Why should our father’s name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father’s relatives (Numbers 27:3-4).

Now, if the Lord had intended the law to be applied woodenly or mechanically, the case would have been clear-cut. As the law stood, Zelophehad's daughters could not receive an inheritance in the Promised Land. But in the next verse, a very remarkable thing happened. Listen to the words of Numbers 27:5:

So Moses brought their case before the Lord (Numbers 27:5).

Isn't that amazing? Moses had delivered the law about property distribution and was the supreme judge in Israel. Above all others in that nation, he had intimate knowledge of the ways of God and of the details of God's law. If anyone should have known how to judge this case, Moses was the man. So, why didn't he know what decision to render?

Moses understood that the law God had given him was designed to manage a situation where there were sons. And he knew that the goal of this law was to secure each family's place within its tribe and to preserve their allotments of tribal lands. But in the case of Zelophehad's daughters, Moses faced the issue of how to apply the standard revealed by this law to a new situation. He needed help from God because he knew that the new situation would affect how he was to apply the law. And God's response is noteworthy. Listen to what God said in Numbers 27:7-8:

What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right... Say to the Israelites, "If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter" (Numbers 27:7-8).

The passage goes on to list a number of other instances in which a man's inheritance might fall to people other than his sons. But the point we are making is this: God indicated that the same aspect of his character was to be applied in different ways in different situations. In many respects, Christians face the same difficulty Moses faced: we have the standard of God's law, but we need to apply it to a new situation. The entire law must be reinterpreted and applied in the light of Christ and his work.

As priest, Christ fulfills the ceremonial aspects of the law. The ceremonial principles of the law are still binding, and we are to follow them by trusting Christ as our sacrifice, and by worshiping in Spirit and in truth.

As king, Christ fulfills the civil aspects of the law. And the church, which is his nation on the earth, is bound to obey these aspects not only by living rightly under our respective earthly governments, which are under Christ's greater lordship, but also by directly honoring Christ as king and by keeping his commandments.

And finally, as prophet, Christ fulfills the moral aspects of the law. We depend on Christ's morality alone as the basis for our acceptance before God. Yet, we must also conform ourselves to Christ's image and example seeking to live as morally as he did during his earthly ministry and as he continues to do in heaven.

In summary, the categories of moral, ceremonial and civil law are helpful in many ways, especially when we think of them as aspects of each law rather than as distinct categories. But these categories should never be used as the basis for ignoring any portion or aspect of God's laws. As we have seen, all of God's law remains our standard for morality, and we are obligated to apply all of God's law to our modern situation. Every bit of God's law still serves as our norm for Christian ethics.

Now that we have established a basic orientation toward the variety of Scripture, and God's law in Scripture, we should explore the unity of Scripture, considering the ways in which the law relates to the other portions of God's written revelation.

UNITY OF SCRIPTURE

It is very common in the modern church to hear Bible teachers say things like, "Christians don't have to obey the law — we just have to believe the gospel," or "The only law that God requires us to obey is the law of love." Now, admittedly, not everything the Bible says about these matters is perfectly clear. But if we rightly analyze all the biblical data, what we discover is that the unity of Scripture is so great that the law is completely compatible with everything else in the Bible.

In this section of our lesson we will look at several ways in which the law interacts with other teachings in Scripture. We will look first at the way the law relates to the commandment of love. Second, we will turn our attention to the relationship between the law and the gospel of grace. Third, we will examine the law in relation to redemptive history and the new covenant. And fourth, we will tackle the issue of the harmony of all divine commands. Let's begin with the law's relationship to the commandment of love.

COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

When we speak of the "love commandment," we are speaking first and foremost of the commandment to love God. And by implication from this commandment, we are also referring to the commandment to love one another. Although neither of these commandments appears in the Ten Commandments, they both have a certain priority that must be acknowledged. As Jesus stated in Matthew 22:37-40:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

Here, Jesus identified the commandment to love God as the greatest commandment of all. He also indicated that the commandment to love our neighbor is the second most important law. And he taught that every other commandment depends upon these two laws. So, every other commandment is, in some sense, a description of how we are to love both God and our neighbors.

In fact, Paul went so far as to say this in Romans 13:9-10:

The commandments ... are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ... Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:9-10).

And in Galatians 5:14 he wrote:

The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

Now, it is important to read Paul’s words with great care, because many theologians have made the mistake of thinking that in these verses Paul taught that Christians do not have to obey any law except the law to love our neighbor. In truth, however, Paul was saying that the command to love our neighbor is inseparable from every other command because all of Scripture’s commands teach us how to love our neighbor. So, if we genuinely, perfectly love our neighbor, we will keep every law that God has given.

To put it another way, neither Jesus nor Paul intended to replace the many various stipulations of the law with a simpler formula requiring only love for God and neighbor. Rather, they both intended to teach that the requirements to love God and neighbor are an aspect of every law and, therefore, that a person who loves perfectly will keep every commandment of the law. Consider, for example, Deuteronomy 6, from which Jesus quoted in the passage from Matthew that we just read. Deuteronomy 6:1-5 reads:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you ... so that you ... may fear the Lord your God ... by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:1-5).

Here we can see that, in its original context, the passage Jesus quoted about loving God was inseparably tied to all the various commandments of the law that God had given through Moses. Love for God was never intended to replace the other requirements.

So, as we seek to understand how to use the law in Christian ethics, we need to keep in mind the primacy and importance of love. Indeed, we need to remember that the entire law of God is summed up in the commands to love God and neighbor. But at the same time, we need to recognize that Scripture’s emphasis on the love commandment does not exempt us from keeping all the other laws in the Bible.

Now that we have examined the interdependence between the love commandment and the rest of the law, we are ready to explore the way the gospel of grace relates to God’s law.

GOSPEL OF GRACE

A common misunderstanding among Christians is that the law is contrary to the gospel of grace. Many believe that because we are saved by grace apart from works of the law, we have absolutely no obligation to obey the law. Others believe that the law is

properly seen only as a threat and terror against sinners, whereas the gospel, by contrast, is what saves us after the law has condemned us. In all actuality, there are so many views about the relationship between the law and the gospel of grace that we cannot possibly mention them all. So, to counter an entire host of false notions, we will describe the biblical perspective on this relationship by focusing on what have traditionally been called the “three uses of the law.”

Since the Protestant Reformation, theologians have frequently spoken of three different ways the law is used in Scripture. Although much agreement exists about the validity of several different uses, theologians have not always been consistent in numbering these uses. So, to avoid confusion, in these lessons we will refer to the three uses of the law in the following order:

The first use of the law is the pedagogical use, or the use of the law as a teacher. When used pedagogically, the law drives men to Christ by inciting and exposing their sin, and threatening punishment against it.

The second use of the law is the civil use. When we use the law for a civil end, we use it to restrain sin in society. This use is sometimes associated with external discipline.

The third use of the law is the normative use. This is the use of the law as a guide or rule for faithful Christians.

The pedagogical or first use of the law speaks of the way God’s law enlivens sin within unbelievers and shows them their need for Christ. We all know the experience of learning that something is forbidden and being drawn all the more to do it. Paul wrote about his own experience with the pedagogical use of the law in Romans 7:7-8, where he wrote these words:

I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire (Romans 7:7-8).

This use of the law is commonly associated with the biblical teaching that believers were once under law, but are now under grace. When unbelievers are confronted by the law’s standards and penalties, they are incited to sin even more, and they recognize the punishment or curse that the law threatens against them because of their sin. This threat drives some unbelievers to Christ, who graciously saves them from the law’s curse. This is the idea behind Paul’s words in Romans 6:14:

Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

In this sense, the pedagogical use of the law does not apply directly to believers. Once a person has been driven to Christ, the law has finished its work in this regard. So, with regard to the pedagogical use, we are no longer under the law.

The civil or second use of the law involves the way the law restrains sin by threatening punishment against those who violate it. We can think of ways we restrain our own behavior for fear of punishment by those who hold civil authority over us. This use of the law is for believers and unbelievers alike, and it focuses especially on God’s

place for civil government as an instrument for restraining evil. In future lessons we will address many subjects related to this use of the law, so for now we will simply mention it and note that it is not incompatible with the gospel of grace.

The third or normative use of the law, however, is very helpful to study when we think about the law in terms of the gospel and Christian ethics. The normative use applies the law in the way that we have been using it in these lectures, namely, as a revelation of God's will for Christian living. We might compare it to the household rules that our parents made to keep us safe and that we obeyed because we loved and trusted our parents. For example, listen to the words of 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

John wrote these words long after Christ had ascended into heaven. Nevertheless, he asserted that the law remains the standard for our behavior. He even went so far as to define all sin in terms of breaking the law. To put it simply, the law is still the standard by which Christian behavior is judged to be righteous or sinful. And many passages indicate that when the law is used as a standard for Christian behavior, it is perfectly compatible with the gospel.

Before we were saved, we were all sinners, incapable of keeping the law. We were under the law's curse because we were lawbreakers. But now that we are saved, we are counted as perfect law-keepers in Christ, so that we receive the law's promised blessings of salvation and life. Paul referred to this state as being "under grace" to contrast it with being under the law's curse.

In short, while believers are not "under law" in the sense that we suffer its curse when we sin, we are "under law" in the sense that we receive its blessings, and in the sense that we are obligated to obey it. In James 1:25 James puts the matter this way:

The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

Now that we have seen how God's law complements both the love commandment and the gospel of grace, we should look at the law in relation to the new covenant and the developments of redemptive history.

NEW COVENANT

When we speak of redemptive history and the new covenant, we are referring to the changes that took place between the Old and New Testament eras as a result of the work of Jesus Christ. And at this point, we are most interested in the way these changes affect our use of the law in Christian ethics. In the Old Testament, the new covenant is mentioned by name only once, and that is in Jeremiah 31:31. The New Testament, on the other hand, refers to it several times. The most helpful mention for our purposes,

however, can be found in Hebrews 8, where the author quotes extensively from Jeremiah 31 and applies it to the church. In Hebrews 8:8-10 we read these words:

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people (Hebrews 8:8-10).

Notice that in this passage the new covenant is not something that frees us from the law. Rather, in the new covenant, the law is still central. In fact, the law is written in our minds and hearts as the rules of the new covenant.

The image of the law being written in our hearts and minds indicates that we know and love the law. Far from leaving the law behind us as a thing of the past, in the new covenant we internalize the law and keep it earnestly. In truth, this is precisely how the law was to be observed even in the old covenant. As the Lord spoke in Deuteronomy 6:6:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts (Deuteronomy 6:6).

And as the psalmist testified in Psalm 119:11:

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11).

God's word was always supposed to be in the hearts and minds of his people, and it really was in the hearts and minds of many, even in the old covenant. The writing of the law on our hearts and minds is not something new or different in the new covenant; it is a point of continuity with the old covenant.

We might even say that the new covenant gives us even greater reasons to obey the law. After all, in the Old Testament believers looked back to the exodus from Egypt and toward life in the Promised Land as the grounds for their obedience to the law. But today Christians look back on the much greater work of salvation in Christ and forward to the even greater work of Christ in his second coming as the grounds for our obedience to the law.

But again, it is important that as Christians we reapply the law in light of the changes that have taken place between the old and new covenants. As the author of Hebrews wrote in 10:1 of his book:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves (Hebrews 10:1).

In the new covenant, Christ has been revealed as the one whom the law prefigured. And as a result, many laws that obligated old covenant believers to do such things as perform sacrifices are now fulfilled by the reality that they foreshadowed, namely, the sacrifice of

Christ. As a result, we rightly keep these laws by relying on Jesus as our sacrifice, not by sacrificing bulls and goats.

In future lessons, we will look more closely at the kinds of adjustments we must make as we apply the law to the New Testament age. But for now, it should be clear that in principle the law applies during the new covenant age.

Now that we have explored the law in relation to love, the gospel, and the new covenant, we are ready to address our final topic: the harmony of all God's commands with one another.

HARMONY

In the legal system of the Bible there are a great number of laws and requirements. These are so numerous and touch on so many matters that these laws sometimes appear to conflict with one another. Conflict between rules is a problem that every deontological or rule-oriented ethical system faces. But in the case of biblical law, there are no real contradictions; God's laws never actually conflict with one another, just as God's character never conflicts with itself. Instead, all the moral teachings of Scripture are in perfect harmony with each other.

As we saw in James 2:10, the law is a unified whole:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

Because the law is unified, its various commands collectively require our obedience. That is to say, whenever our actions are in true agreement with any particular stipulation of the law, they are in agreement with the whole.

So, whenever it appears that particular laws in Scripture contradict each other, it simply means that we have not yet come to understand the law correctly. The fact is, we will never understand the entire law perfectly, so from time to time we will feel torn between God's various laws. How do we resolve these tensions, practically speaking? Well, there are many things that could be said about such situations, but we will mention just two.

In the first place, God's laws are given with the implicit understanding that at times some laws take priority over others. For example, in Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus gives the following instruction:

If you are offering your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus taught that reconciliation between God's people takes precedence even over certain offerings made to God — so much so that even if a believer is at the altar and ready to present his gift, he should delay his offering until he has made things right with his brother.

Whenever certain sins are said to be worse than others, or certain laws are said to be more important than others, we should realize that the Bible is assigning different levels of priority to its various commands. Thus, giving priority to one law over another is actually in accordance with the whole of the law, and therefore it is not a conflict between particular laws at all.

In the second place, biblical laws are also given with the implicit understanding that there are exceptions to rules. That is to say, in the Bible's legal system, it is assumed that in emergencies and other unusual circumstances, normal regulations may be transcended by more important principles.

Consider, for instance, the confrontation between the apostles and the Sanhedrin in Acts 5. In this situation, the Sanhedrin had commanded the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus, but the apostles had ignored their command. The apostles' defense of their action is recorded in Acts 5:29:

We must obey God rather than men! (Acts 5:29).

In this case, as the governing body of the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin did have some legitimate authority over the apostles. And as a general rule, the Bible requires us to obey human authorities. However, when the Sanhedrin contradicted God's commands, this created an exception to the general rule that we are to obey our human leaders. Because of this exception, the righteous and good thing for the apostles to do was to disobey the Sanhedrin and to obey God.

But again, this was not a case where one law conflicted with another. After all, the law is a unified whole revealing God's character, and God's character is not at odds with itself. Rather, the law anticipates that general principles will sometimes indicate contrary courses of action. In these cases, the right thing to do must be discovered by looking at every command and principle, and measuring the situation and motivations in light of every obligation. The best course of action will be obedient to the entire body of the law in its full meaning, even if it does not resemble the way we usually apply some principles.

Of course, we have to be cautious when we assign priorities to various commands in Scripture. And because we are limited, fallen human beings, there will no doubt be some times when we can't figure out the right thing to do and even some times when we make the wrong decisions. Nevertheless, we must always remember that the Scriptures are unified, and therefore we must work hard to find the ways that the laws of God harmonize with each other.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at the ways the many parts and aspects of Scripture work together as God's standard for Christian ethics. We have seen that the varieties of language and literature in Scripture must each be handled somewhat differently and that each has something special to tell us about ethics. We have also explored the divisions

and functions of God's law in Scripture. And we have seen how the law is unified with itself and with all other portions of Scripture.

As we continue our study of biblical ethics, it is important to remember that there are many different parts and aspects of Scripture and that each one communicates ethical information to us in different ways. By keeping these ideas in mind as we continue to study and to live our lives before God, we will be able to handle each part and aspect of Scripture more responsibly and to match our lives more closely to the standards that God has revealed to us.

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
FIVE

THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
REVELATION AND SITUATION



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Five

The Situational Perspective: Revelation and Situation

INTRODUCTION

Every parent knows that children often misunderstand the simplest of instructions. It might be, “Please help me with dinner,” or “Clean up your room.” But whatever the instruction is, children have a way of coming up with odd interpretations of what their parents require. Sometimes this is a willful decision on the child’s part, but at other times the misunderstanding is genuine.

Figuring out the right thing to do can sometimes be difficult. And there is a good reason for this. Whether we realize it or not, following even simple instructions requires us to have substantial knowledge about many things besides the instructions. This is easy to see when it comes to little children since they often lack the knowledge they need.

But even as adults we have to rely on our knowledge of many subjects when we follow instructions. And this is particularly true when it comes to understanding what God requires of us. For us to know what to do in any given circumstance, we must not only know the Lord’s specific instructions, but we must understand many other things as well.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it “The Situational Perspective: Revelation and Situation.” In this lesson, we will turn our attention to the situational perspective on ethics, focusing on how a proper understanding of situations can help us understand God’s revelation.

Throughout these lessons we have emphasized that ethical judgment involves the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person. This summary highlights the fact that there are three essential dimensions to every ethical question, namely, God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision. And in this lesson we will focus on two of these dimensions, looking at the relationship between our ethical situation and the norms revealed in God’s Word.

Throughout this series of lessons, we have also described the relationship between God’s Word, situations, and persons in terms of three perspectives on ethics. First, there is the normative perspective, which looks at ethics from the perspective of God’s Word. This perspective emphasizes the rules, or norms, that God reveals to us.

Second, the situational perspective approaches ethics with an emphasis on the situation, considering how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions and on how we can work with these circumstances to bring glory to God.

Third, there is the existential perspective, which considers ethics from the perspective of the persons who make ethical decisions. This perspective emphasizes their roles and characteristics, and the ways they must change in order to please the Lord.

All three of these perspectives are true, valuable, and complementary. So, the wisest course of action is to use all three perspectives together, allowing each one to inform our understanding of the others.

In this particular lesson, we will approach ethics from the situational perspective, looking at how the various elements of our situation should inform the decisions we make.

Our lesson will divide into four major sections: First, we will consider the situational content of revelation, paying attention to what revelation teaches us about ethical situations. Second, we will speak of the situational nature of revelation. Here we will be especially concerned with noting that God's revelation must be understood within the context of its own situations. Third, we will discuss some popular interpretive strategies toward revelation, looking at some ways that Christians have handled the situational character of revelation. And fourth, we will turn to the application of revelation to our modern situations. Let's begin with the content of revelation as one of the most important sources of information about our situation.

CONTENT OF REVELATION

As you will recall from earlier lessons, there are three basic types of revelation: special revelation, such as the Bible; general revelation, which comes to us through the creation in general; and existential revelation, which comes to us through persons. We must always remember that God reveals his will to us in all three of these ways.

Now, even though special, general, and existential revelation differ in some respects, they all communicate content in the form of facts. These facts include everything that God reveals about our situation, such as events, people, objects, ideas, duties, actions — even God and his revelation.

It is possible to speak of the facts that God's revelation communicates in countless ways. In addition to speaking about facts in general, we will also speak of goals and means. Goals are the intended or potential outcomes of thoughts, words, and deeds. They are the ends for which we do things, or for which we ought to do things. And means are ways of reaching our goals. They include everything we might think, say, or do, and any tool or method that we might use in order to accomplish our objectives.

We will take a closer look at the content of revelation by looking briefly at each of the situational elements we have mentioned. First, we will consider revelation in terms of the facts it presents to us. Second, we will look at the goals revelation obligates us to pursue. And third, we will explore the means revelation teaches us to use as we pursue these goals. Let's begin with the general facts that revelation presents to us.

FACTS

Now, for obvious reasons, it would be impossible to list every fact that special, general, and existential revelation communicate to us. So, in order to illustrate the important role that facts play in our ethical evaluations, we will focus on God himself as the most basic fact that we learn through revelation.

When we studied the normative perspective in previous lessons, we saw that God's character is our ultimate norm or standard. Correspondingly, from the situational

perspective, God is our ultimate fact, our ultimate ethical environment. The reality of God's existence rules over every ethical question, and obligates us to live by the standard of his character.

Of course, in order for us to know our obligations before God, he must first reveal himself to us. And this is where revelation comes in. Through revelation, God tells us facts about himself and facts about what he requires. Without revelation, we would still be bound to obey God, but we would not know how.

Think in terms of the situation you face as a citizen of a country. The government is the authority of the land, and its laws are means through which the government exercises control over its subjects. The government also exercises control in other ways. It has employees that carry out its bidding. It has maps that define its boundaries. It has treaties and other relationships with foreign countries. It has currency to administer the economy, and so on. All of these are means by which the government exercises its authority, and controls those things under its authority.

Or to put it another way, the existence of the government is a fact in our legal situation, and its laws are additional facts that explain the kinds of duties we owe to the government. And if we want to obey the government, these are facts that we need to know.

In a similar way, God is the supreme authority over all creation. His authority is absolute, and his character is the perfect expression of his will. So, when he reveals his character, that revelation is the means through which God exercises control much like human governments exercise control through their laws. And just as human beings obey civil laws because they bow to the government's authority, all creation must obey God's laws by bowing to his authority.

Besides communicating the facts to us, God's revelation also teaches us about a special set of facts that are particularly important for ethics: the proper goals for Christian behavior and decision making.

GOALS

When we speak of goals in ethics, we have in mind the expected outcomes of our endeavors. In many ways, this is no different from the way that we set goals to accomplish anything else in life. I might set a goal to wake up at a certain time each day, or to buy a present for my wife on her birthday. Our goals can be small or large. They can be things we hope to accomplish immediately, or things we plan to do in the distant future. But in every case, our goals give direction to our actions.

Now, in most cases, our goals are rather complex. For example, consider a carpenter who measures and cuts wood for the purpose of building a house. When he does, his most immediate goals are to measure and cut accurately. A more distant goal is to build the house. He may also be working to earn money to feed his family. And if his actions are to be truly good, his ultimate goal must be to do it all for the glory of God.

And just as special, general, and existential revelation each teach us important generic facts, each type of revelation also provides us with goals that we must adopt in Christian ethics.

In the first place, special revelation gives us countless goals that must be considered in Christian ethics. To name just a few, Scripture teaches us the goals of doing good to our neighbors, and raising children in Christ, and striving for the unity of the church. But among the many goals that special revelation teaches us, it presents God's glory as the highest and most important.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul gave this instruction:

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

Even in smaller things in life, such as choosing what to eat and drink, our ultimate goal must be to glorify God.

General revelation also identifies many goals that are good and others that are evil. And like special revelation, it teaches us the greatest goal is to glorify and thank God. Listen to Paul's words in Romans 1:20-21:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:20-21).

God's glory in creation reveals that we must be loyal to God and that we must praise him — that we must glorify him in all that we do. In short, it teaches us to set God's glory as our highest goal.

Finally, existential revelation also helps us to discern good goals from evil goals, especially through our consciences. And in the case of believers, the Holy Spirit is another source of existential revelation, moving within us so that we pursue good goals and shun evil ones. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:13:

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

We see here that God works in us existentially, through the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit, enabling us and moving us to act according to his purpose, according to his goal.

So, we see that God uses all three forms of revelation — special, general, and existential — in order to teach us the goals that God approves.

Having looked at the situational content of revelation in terms of facts and goals, we are now ready to explore the means that God has revealed for us to use in our ethical situations.

MEANS

In the early sixteenth century, the Florentine political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli wrote a book that has come to be known by the title *The Prince*. In many languages Machiavelli's name is synonymous with the slogan "the end justifies the means." His work has become somewhat infamous for teaching that in many cases politicians must violate moral principles in order to achieve goals that benefit the state.

But God's revelation presents us with a very different idea. To answer any ethical question in a *biblical* manner, we must not only know the facts and goals God has revealed, but we must also find the appropriate means that God has revealed. After all, assessing facts and setting goals are things that influence our actions. But our actions themselves are the *means* we have chosen to accomplish our goals. And as all Christians are aware, the Bible has much to say about how we *act*. So, what God has said about the means we choose is a vitally important element of our decision-making process. Consider James' teaching in James 2:15-16:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (James 2:15-16).

It is important to recognize the fact that there are poor people in need of food and clothing. And it is also important to set the goal of seeing them warmed and fed. But the means of reaching this goal is critical: we must actually give them food and clothes.

In this case, James called for his readers to seek insights primarily from general and existential revelation by asking questions like, what means are available to me to help the poor? But, we must always remember that special revelation also has much to teach us about the means we should use to accomplish godly goals.

One of the main ways Scripture teaches us about ethical means is by giving us examples to consider. On the one hand, we find many negative examples of people who did not perform so admirably. But on the other hand, we also find many positive examples of people who properly understood God's norms, properly assessed their circumstances, and then performed good actions in order to achieve good ends.

On the one hand, the apostle Paul drew attention to negative examples in 1 Corinthians 10:8-11, where he wrote these words:

We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us (1 Corinthians 10:8-11).

Paul drew these negative examples from the experiences of the ancient Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. God had made many generic facts clear to the Israelites. He had also revealed the goals of their journey. But as they

traveled, the Israelites sinned greatly by turning away from the means God had instructed them to use to accomplish their goals — means such as godly living, purity in worship and prayer. Instead, the Israelites preferred the means of sexual immorality, idolatry, and grumbling. And so, they serve as a negative example, showing us some means that God disapproves and strongly curses.

On the other hand, Paul also drew attention to positive examples, as in 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he gave this instruction:

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Here, Paul offered himself and Jesus as two positive examples of ethical behavior. In this case, Paul was speaking broadly of all the information the Corinthians had received about Jesus and about himself, whether it had come through special, general, or existential revelation. And he indicated that by remembering the perfect life of Jesus, and his own imperfect but exemplary behavior, the Corinthians could learn not only facts and goals, but also godly means.

In summary, we see that the situational content of revelation includes facts, goals and means that are essential to making proper ethical choices. So, if we are to make biblical decisions in our daily lives, we have to understand what God has revealed about these dimensions of our situation.

Now that we have seen that knowing our duty entails understanding what the content of revelation tells us about our situation, we should turn to our second topic: the situational nature of revelation itself. God's revelation comes to us embedded in its own situations. And because of this, we need to consider questions like, what are the circumstances for which, and within which, God has revealed himself? And how does understanding these situations help us to make ethical decisions?

NATURE OF REVELATION

Recognizing what God's revelation says about facts, goals and means is an important part of knowing our duty. But it is also critical that we understand how revelation is influenced by its own situation. If we fail to understand how situations influence the way God reveals himself, we run the risk of misunderstanding what he has revealed.

As we have seen in other lessons, since the beginning of creation, general and existential revelation have always been accompanied by special revelation. In our day, the special revelation of Scripture has been given to us as a guide, as eyeglasses through which we must interpret general and existential revelation. This means that Scripture has a practical priority over everything we may think we have found in general and existential revelation.

General revelation affirms Scripture, but it can never reveal any ethical norms that are not also revealed in Scripture. So, any contribution that general revelation makes to our knowledge of our duty is purely a clarification of what Scripture already offers us.

And the same thing is true of existential revelation. Existential revelation affirms the teaching of Scripture and never teaches us any ethical norm that is not also directly or implicitly taught in Scripture.

All of God's revelation is important, valuable, and true. But because *Scripture* is the key to understanding all of God's Word, our discussions of the situational nature of revelation will focus particularly on the Bible. Still, we should keep in mind that much of what we say about the Bible is also true of the rest of God's revelation.

We will divide our discussion of the situational nature of revelation into two parts: First, we will speak about the inspiration of Scripture, considering the facts, goals, and means surrounding the writing of Scripture. Second, we will look at an example that confirms the importance of understanding the facts, goals, and means that are involved in the inspiration of Scripture. Let's begin with the inspiration of Scripture — that manner in which God moved human authors to create Scripture.

INSPIRATION

Scripture is a divinely inspired human writing. The Holy Spirit motivated and superintended the writings of the human authors in order to ensure that everything they contain is true. The Spirit did this in ways that kept the human authors free from error, but that also preserved their personalities and their intentions in their writings. As a result of this process, the original meaning of Scripture is the meaning the divine and human authors of Scripture jointly intended to communicate. This is not a composite meaning, as if the human author intended one meaning and the Holy Spirit intended a different meaning. Rather, it is a unified meaning in which both the Holy Spirit and the human author intended the same thing.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians act as if God did not give us Scripture within historical situations. They treat the Bible as timeless, as if it were written without human involvement. But when we consider what biblical writers said about their own books, we see that this is not the case. The Scriptures were given in historical situations.

This doctrine of inspiration is described in many places in the Bible, but we will limit ourselves to two texts that demonstrate the contributions that both the Holy Spirit and the human writers made to the content of Scripture. In the first place, let's consider the Holy Spirit's role as the author of Scripture. Listen to the way Peter explained the nature of inspiration in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

As Peter mentioned here, the Bible is not a merely human writing. It is a book written by men who were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Peter assures us that everything we find in Scripture carries God's authority and is utterly trustworthy.

Now, at various times, Christian teachers have misunderstood this and other biblical texts and have concluded that the Holy Spirit is the only true author of Scripture. These teachers have wrongly believed that the human writers made no contributions to their own writings. So, let's move to a different text — one that indicates that the human writers of Scripture also had tremendous input into their writings.

In Matthew 22:41-45, we find the following conversation between Jesus and some Pharisees who opposed him:

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” “The son of David,” they replied. He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (Matthew 22:41-45).

Here, Jesus referred to Psalm 110:1. And his point was that in order to understand what the Holy Spirit meant in this verse, it was necessary first to know that David wrote it, and second to know the original meaning David intended to communicate.

To understand the original meaning of any given Scripture, we have to learn many facts about its authors, such as their circumstances, their experiences, their education, their theology, and their priorities. And often, our understanding of these things can be enhanced by other information that comes from outside the Bible, such as historical, cultural, and linguistic facts.

Beyond this, we have to pay attention to the goals of the authors of Scripture. What were their motives? What audiences did they hope would read their writings? And what responses did they try to elicit from these readers?

Further, we have to consider the means biblical writers employed; things like the language in which they wrote, the genre of literature they used, their rhetorical techniques, and the structures of their thoughts and arguments.

To rely on Scripture properly in Christian ethics, we must evaluate all these facts, goals, and means in order to learn *why* the authors of Scripture wrote as they did, *what* they meant when they wrote, and *how* their original audiences would have understood them.

EXAMPLE

Now that we have described the situational nature of the inspiration of Scripture, we should look at an example from the Bible that confirms the importance of considering these situational features of revelation.

Admittedly, it is impossible to identify *all* the facts, goals, and means that are relevant to any particular text of Scripture, let alone to understand how they relate to the original meaning. But fortunately, the Bible itself records many examples that can guide us. Biblical writers and reliable biblical characters often explained Scriptures written by

prior authors. And their examples provide us with many opportunities to see the importance of the situational aspects of Scripture.

To illustrate the kinds of situational considerations we must keep in mind, let's look at 1 Corinthians 10:5-11, where Paul focused on the situational character of the Old Testament account of Israel in the wilderness. There he wrote these words:

God was not pleased with most of [our forefathers]; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things... Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel. These things ... were written down as warnings for us (1 Corinthians 10:5-11).

In this passage, Paul referred to four Old Testament passages:

- Exodus 32, where the Israelites indulged in pagan revelry and about 3,000 men were put to death as punishment.
- Numbers 25, where they committed sexual immorality and 23,000 died.
- Numbers 21, where they tested the Lord and many were killed by snakes.
- Numbers 16, where they grumbled against Moses and many were killed by the destroying angel.

But notice that Paul did not simply point out these historical details. Rather, he explained that Moses had recorded these details in order to provide an example for future readers. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:11:

These things ... were written down as warnings for us (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Paul believed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of warning future generations against repeating the failures of the Israelites. And because he understood the situation of these passages in this way, Paul highlighted a number of facts that these passages presented.

First, he noted the fact that God was not pleased by the actions of the ancient Israelites. Moses explicitly stated this in the texts to which Paul referred. Second, Paul reinforced this point by noting the fact that God killed many Israelites for these sins; as he wrote, "their bodies were scattered over the desert." This was significant to Paul because it indicated God's extreme moral disapproval of the Israelites. Third, Paul paid attention to the fact that specific actions displeased God: paganism, idolatry, testing, and grumbling.

In addition to these facts that Paul mentioned specifically, he also assumed many other facts, such as the fact that Scripture is true, and the fact that it is authoritative, and

the fact that it is applicable to Christians. And on the basis of many such facts, Paul was able to conclude that Moses' goal was to use the means of inspired Scripture to record these things for future generations so that they would learn from Israel's mistakes.

We do not have time to explore all the nuances of Paul's method here. But it is worth noting that he was concerned with at least two types of situational matters as he interpreted these inspired Old Testament texts:

- First, the details reported in Scripture — Paul accepted the Old Testament as factual and reliable, and knew that the details of the stories were important to their meanings.
- Second, the author's intention — Paul understood that Moses' goal was not simply to tell us what happened a long time ago. Rather, he wrote to elicit a response from his readers.

Now, this list is in no way exhaustive, but it is a good — and even an authoritative — example of the types of situational features we must consider when we interpret Scripture. We must consider things that Scripture makes explicit, such as the factual details it reports. And we must consider things that are implicit in Scripture, such as the author's intention or goal in writing. By remembering the situational nature of Scripture in these and other ways, we can have greater confidence that we have understood it rightly.

Now that we have looked at how the content of revelation addresses the facts, goals, and means of our situation, and at the historically situated nature of revelation, we should turn our attention to some popular strategies toward dealing with the situational character of revelation.

STRATEGIES TOWARD REVELATION

As we work in Christian ethics from the situational perspective, we are often challenged by the fact that we are dealing with two situations, the situation of Scripture and our modern situation. And this means that we have to find ways to connect the situations of Scripture to our modern world. This process is often quite complex, and unfortunately, Christians have a tendency to look for shortcuts that oversimplify the issues involved. So before we address modern application itself, we should look at some of these mistaken strategies that Christians often adopt.

In our discussion we will touch on three popular strategies toward dealing with the situational character of revelation: First, we will speak of the strategy of laxity. Second, we will speak of the strategy of rigor. And third, we will speak of the strategy that favors human authority. For the sake of time, we will limit ourselves to discussing Scripture. But once again, we should be aware that these same strategies are often taken toward other types of revelation as well.

To illustrate the difficulty of relating the scripture to the modern world, let's imagine a house on a large piece of land that gradually gives way to hazardous wilderness. The house represents those things that are clearly commanded or permitted in

Scripture. The wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden in the Bible. The land around the house represents those things that, to one degree or another, are unclear to the person reading the Bible; matters in which we are unsure how to relate the situations of scripture to the situations of our modern world. This perceived lack of clarity has often led Christians to adopt simple strategies for defining the boundaries of Christian morality; strategies that we are describing in terms of laxity, rigor and human authority. So, let's begin with laxity as a popular but mistaken strategy toward relating the situational dimensions of revelation to the modern world.

LAXITY

Our discussion of laxity will divide into three parts: First, we will give a basic description of this strategy and its causes. Second, we will offer some examples of the consequences of laxity. And third, we will suggest some correctives that can help us avoid laxity in our handling of Scripture. Let's begin with a basic description of laxity.

Description

Laxity is a strategy that tends toward permissiveness so that those who use this strategy are slow to identify and condemn sins in the modern world. As a result, they frequently end up permitting what the Bible prohibits and overlooking what the Bible commands.

Christians are predisposed to lax readings of Scripture for at least two reasons. Sometimes, they wrongly believe that the situations in the Bible are so different from the situations in modern life that the Bible cannot be applied to our day. At other times, Christians adopt a strategy of laxity because they believe that the situations in the Bible are too vague to be applied to modern life. Often, this is because they think that the facts, goals, and means in the Bible are ambiguous, or even unknowable.

Think in terms of our illustration of a house surrounded by a large piece of land that gradually gives way to hazardous wilderness. As you will recall, the house represents those things that are clearly permitted in Scripture. The wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden in the Bible. The land around the house represents those matters in which Scripture's instructions are somewhat unclear to the reader.

Now suppose that we want to build a fence around those things that Scripture permits, so that we can define the boundaries of Christian morality. A strategy of laxity would tend to build the fence as close as possible to the edge of the wilderness in order to permit the things that are unclear.

But there is a problem with this lax practice. Not everything that is unclear to us is permitted. So, if we put the fence at the edge of the wilderness, we will almost certainly permit things that Scripture actually forbids.

So, whether by assuming that the biblical situation is so different from ours that we cannot apply it, or by insisting that it is too vague to be applied with any confidence, lax understandings tend to place too few restrictions on Christian behavior.`

With this description of the strategy of laxity in mind, we should mention some examples of the consequences that can result from this approach toward revelation.

Consequences

The consequences of laxity are fairly predictable: a strategy of laxity encourages Christians to rationalize many sins. We will mention just four of the many ways this can happen. First, laxity can encourage Christians to be satisfied with choosing the lesser of contrasting wrongs, inclining them to justify a wrong action on the basis that it appears to be more righteous than the opposite action.

Consider a husband and wife who have grown to despise each other. Now, we know that the Bible condemns divorce without proper justification and that it requires spouses to love each other. But Christians who adopt a lax approach may argue that the Bible is unclear about what Christians should do in this particular situation. And they may advise divorce on the basis that it seems better than a hateful relationship.

But when we assess the facts, goals, and means of Scripture in a responsible way, we find that it does speak rather clearly to this modern situation. The true solution is for all husbands and wives to conform to the moral instructions of Scripture by repenting of their own sin and by learning to love each other in the bonds of marriage.

Second, laxity tends to permit inappropriate exceptions to biblical commands. This often happens when Christians fail to see that scriptural commands apply to more situations than those specifically mentioned in the Bible.

For example, in Jesus' day some people believed that so long as they did not commit physical adultery, they were not violating the commandment against adultery. They were lax in seeing the true implications of this commandment against adultery for situations other than physical infidelity. But in Matthew 5:28 Jesus corrected them, saying:

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

When we fail to learn the facts, goals, and means related to the commandment against adultery, we can easily deny that both adultery and lust violate God's will.

Third, laxity tends to encourage Christians to add false qualifications to the Bible's commands. They imagine facts, goals, or means that the Bible does not indicate, and use these imagined qualifications as excuses for ignoring the commands of Scripture.

For example, in Deuteronomy 25:4 the law prohibits muzzling an ox while it is threshing grain. And a lax strategy toward Scripture might imagine the false qualification that this verse applies only to people who use oxen to thresh grain. We might think to ourselves, "I have no oxen; therefore this command does not apply to me." But in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul appealed to this law to prove that Christian ministers should be paid for their efforts. In cases like this, a lax strategy discourages Christians from applying the principles of biblical commands to situations that are different from those of Scripture.

Fourth, a strategy of laxity can lead us to think that good motives sometimes excuse evil actions. That is, when we believe that the facts, goals, and means of Scripture are too different or too vague, we may be inclined to judge actions on the sole basis of our modern motives.

For example, many of us might be inclined to excuse a starving man who steals food. Now, admittedly, the motivation of the man who steals to eat is very different from that of the man who steals for lazy profit. Nevertheless, God's Word still condemns both actions. As we read in Proverbs 6:30-31:

Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving. Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house (Proverbs 6:30-31).

In summary, a strategy of laxity tends to be too permissive, allowing what God forbids and thereby hiding our true duty from us. It encourages us to navigate the details of God's Law with as much personal license as possible, always looking for ways to avoid its obligations.

Having considered the description and consequences of laxity, we will now offer some correctives to this mistaken strategy toward revelation.

Correctives

As we have said, laxity is commonly rooted either in the belief that Scripture is so different that it is inapplicable, or in the belief that it is too vague to be applicable. So, one of the best ways to avoid this error is to understand the Bible's similarity to the modern world, as well as its clarity.

On the one hand, the Bible assures us that the situations of Scripture are always sufficiently similar to our own for us to make modern applications. In one way or another, every passage in the Bible has something to teach us about ethics in the modern world. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

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).

Whenever we are tempted to think that the Bible is inapplicable because its situations are so different from ours, we need to look more closely at both the facts, goals, and means related to Scripture, and the facts, goals, and means of modern life. If we do, we may discover some correspondence that helps us apply Scripture. But even if we find that the situations of Scripture and modern life still appear to be different, we should not conclude that the Bible is inapplicable. Rather, we should admit our limitations, determine to keep studying the matter, and seek insight from other people such as pastors and teachers.

On the other hand, with regard to the Bible's vagueness, the Bible also teaches that Scripture is sufficiently clear. As Moses wrote 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).

God provided Scripture to give us knowledge of our duty. And he designed it to communicate not just to the original audience, but also to future generations, or as we read here, to our children forever.

The Bible is not equally clear in all areas, and not every person can understand every passage. But Scripture is always clear enough for ethical applications to be drawn from it. So, whenever we are tempted to think that the Bible is unclear, we should remember that the fault lies with us, not with Scripture. And in order to correct this fault, we need to reexamine the facts, goals, and means of Scripture, searching for its original meaning. Sometimes this will help us to understand Scripture sufficiently to apply it to modern life. And if it does not, we should admit our limitations, determine to keep studying the matter, and seek the counsel of those who are wiser than we are.

Having seen that errors arise when we adopt laxity as our strategy, we should now look at the errors that result from a strategy of rigor in our understanding and application of Scripture.

RIGOR

Our discussion of the strategy of rigor will proceed in the same manner as our discussion of laxity. First, we will present a general description of rigor as a strategy. Second, we will offer some examples of the consequences of rigor. And third, we will suggest some correctives that can help us avoid using this poor strategy. Let's begin with a description of the strategy of rigor.

Description

When Christians are inclined to follow a rigorous strategy toward revelation, they are extremely concerned to guard against sin, especially as it is defined in the prohibitions listed in Scripture. As a result, they tend to err on the side of overly restricting behavior rather than on the side of permitting it.

Like the strategy of laxity, the strategy of rigor also commonly results from mistaken beliefs about the Bible's similarity to the modern world and about its clarity.

With regard to the Bible's similarity to the modern world, a strategy of rigor often views the situations in the Bible as being so similar to our own that the Bible is directly applicable to our lives. This strategy gives little or no consideration to the ways that the facts, goals, and means of Scripture differ from those in the modern world. Christians who endorse this approach often argue that proper application amounts to doing precisely what was expected in biblical times.

And with regard to the Bible's clarity, Christians who endorse a rigorous strategy mistakenly believe that when the Bible's facts, goals and means appear to be vague, the proper response is to apply Scripture in restrictive ways.

Recall the illustration of the house and the fence. Once again, the house represents those things that are clearly permitted in Scripture and the wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden in the Bible. And the land around the house represents those things that, to one degree or another, are unclear to us as we read the Bible — matters in which we are unsure how the facts, goals, and means taught in Scripture relate to the facts, goals, and means of the modern world.

And again, suppose that we want to build a fence around those things that Scripture permits so that we can define the boundaries of Christian morality. As we saw, a strategy of laxity would build the fence at the edge of the wilderness in order to permit those behaviors that Scripture does not clearly condemn. But by contrast, a strategy of rigor would tend to build the fence very close to the house so as to forbid most or all of what is unclear, in order to avoid stumbling into immorality.

But there is a problem with this rigorous practice: many of the things in the yard that are outside the fence are actually permitted or even commanded in Scripture. When we respond to the Bible's teachings in such restrictive ways, we often end up forbidding some things that God permits and other things that God actually commands.

So, whether by assuming that the biblical situation is so similar to our own that we can directly apply it, or by responding with inappropriate restrictiveness to the Bible's apparent vagueness, rigorous understandings tend to place too many limitations on Christian behavior.

With this description in mind, we are ready to speak of the consequences of the strategy of rigor.

Consequences

There are many negative results of this rigorous approach, so for the sake of time we will mention only two. First, it destroys Christian freedom by prohibiting behaviors that are wrong under certain conditions, but good under other conditions.

The Bible teaches that Christians have certain freedoms of conscience. That is, there are some actions that may be good for some people and evil for others. The classic examples of this are Paul's discussions of food that had been sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8–10, and in Romans 14 there is similar discussion of the use of meats and the observance of special days. In these chapters, Paul indicated that eating food that had been sacrificed to idols was acceptable for those with strong consciences but sinful for those with weak consciences. In light of this, Paul offered parameters of who could eat this food and under what conditions, but the ultimate determination depended on the individual's conscience.

Since matters of conscience are often unclear, a strategy of rigor would tend to prohibit everyone from eating this food in order to ensure that no one ever violated his conscience. But this would necessarily involve prohibiting Christians with strong consciences from receiving God's blessings. And Paul taught that such blanket prohibitions are wrong. 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).

Second, a strategy of rigor also inspires despair in believers by turning God's Word into a heavy burden. God gave his word to his people to bless them, not to oppress them. And there are many, many places in Scripture that state this idea. For instance, listen to Jesus' words in Mark 2:27:

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

Jesus taught that God had given the Sabbath commandment in order to bless his people. And in Romans 9:4-5, Paul included the law in his list of tremendous blessings that God had given to Israel. Listen to what he wrote there:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Romans 9:4-5).

No one would dispute that every other item in this list is a great blessing. So, why did Paul include the receiving of the law? The answer is simple — because the law really is one of God's great blessings to his people.

Sadly, the tendency to condemn whatever is not explicitly permitted tends to turn God's Word into a long list of prohibitions. And this causes Christians to be so preoccupied with law-keeping that they begin to think of God as a harsh taskmaster rather than as a loving father. Many even feel that God is greatly displeased with them when they fail to live up to their self-imposed rigorous standards.

In summary then, a strategy of rigor denies Christian freedom, and it inspires us to despair. In these ways, it hinders our attempts to learn our duty, and it hampers our ability to take joy in the God of our salvation.

Having presented our description of the strategy of rigor, as well as some of its consequences, we should now turn to some correctives that can keep us from this error.

Correctives

As we have seen, a strategy of rigor generally depends on one of two illusions. On the one hand, it can result from the mistaken belief that Scripture's situational features are so similar to ours that the Bible is directly applicable to the modern world. On the other hand, it can result from the mistaken viewpoint that Scripture's facts, goals, and means are vague or even unknowable.

So, a good corrective to rigor is to realize that modern situations are sufficiently different from biblical situations so that we cannot simplistically mimic the applications

we find in Scripture. Indeed, we must account for differences between our situations and those in the Bible. Consider, for example, the commandment of Exodus 20:13:

You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).

This commandment can be applied rather directly to some aspects of modern life. For instance, it is easy to see that this commandment prohibits killing a man in order to steal his property.

But it becomes harder to apply this commandment directly to modern life when we consider situations like self-defense or war. A strategy of rigor might tend to forbid all killings of human beings, believing that the commandment intends to address all such situations in the same way. But this conclusion is incompatible with scriptural passages where Israel's military heroes are blessed for killing God's enemies. For instance, listen to these words from Hebrews 11:32-33:

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised (Hebrews 11:32-33).

Notice that the first thing for which these men are praised is that they conquered kingdoms. They were military leaders and judges who had great success in defeating God's enemies in war.

In light of facts like these, we must look for a more biblical approach of the application of the commandment against murder. We must recognize that the situations addressed in the commandment against murder are not precisely the same as the situations involved in war and self-defense. And we must explore other biblical passages that also bear on these issues, looking for a conclusion that accords with all of Scripture. And the answers will likely vary from case to case and even from person to person.

In addition to gaining a proper view of the differences between biblical and modern situations, we can also avoid a strategy of rigor by remembering that Scripture is always sufficiently clear to communicate God's will with regard to Christian ethics. We have already spoken of this corrective in our preceding discussion of the corrective to laxity. But as a reminder, let's listen once more to Moses' words 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).

God provided Scripture so that the ancient Israelites, as well as future generations like us, would know our duty. And this implies that the facts, goals, and means of Scripture are clear enough for us to discern our obligations, so that we do not need to appeal to quick and easy strategies like rigor.

Now that we have discussed the strategies of laxity and rigor, let's turn our attention to the strategy of human authority as a third mistaken yet popular strategy for handling situational considerations.

HUMAN AUTHORITY

Once again, we will proceed by considering first a description of this strategy, then by moving to its consequences, and finally to a corrective. Let's begin with our description of the strategy of human authority.

Description

When interpreters are predisposed toward human authority, they have too strong a tendency to defer to the judgments of other human beings. This human authority could be an influential church leader, a secular teacher, or even a parent or friend. Or it might take the form of traditional or ecclesiastical views of the Bible's ethical teachings.

Now, it is important to remember that all these human authorities can play positive roles in the interpretive process. We have a long and honored tradition of theology in the church. And many scholars have discovered much helpful information about the facts, goals and means of Scripture. And even the secular community has produced many valuable insights into the situations of Scripture. So, we are right to consider these human authorities as we search the Scriptures for ethical teachings. Nevertheless, these human traditions and communities are fallible so that believers must never blindly submit to such authorities.

Recall once again the illustration of the house and the fence where the wilderness represents those things that are clearly forbidden, the house represents those things that are clearly permitted, and the land around the house represents those things that are somewhat unclear in Scripture.

As we saw, a strategy of laxity would build the fence at the edge of the wilderness to permit the things that seem to be unclear. And by contrast, a strategy of rigor would tend to build the fence very close to the house in order to forbid most or all of what is unclear. Well, not surprisingly, Christians who follow a strategy of human authority do not decide for themselves where to put the fence. Instead, they put the fence wherever the authority figures instruct them to put it.

Of course, there are various reasons that people rely too heavily on human authority. Sometimes they are members of churches whose leaders claim to have exclusive insight into the Scriptures or exclusive authority to interpret them. Others may believe that their knowledge is so insufficient that they simply have no basis for confidence in their own study of the Bible. And some are simply lazy. But in every case, whenever a Christian abdicates his or her responsibility to search the Scriptures and ultimately submits to the decisions of mere human beings, that Christian is employing the strategy of human authority.

Keeping in mind this description of the strategy of human authority, let's turn to the consequences that this strategy can have in the life of believers.

Consequences

We'll consider just two of the many problems that can arise when we depend too heavily on human authority, beginning with the rejection of the supreme authority of Scripture. For all practical purposes, when people entirely submit to the judgments of human authorities, they reject the Bible as their ultimate revealed norm.

Consider an example from the New Testament. According to the Gospels, Jesus encountered many Pharisees who rejected the supreme authority of Scripture in favor of traditional interpretations. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 15:4-6:

For God said, "Honor your father and mother" ... But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God," he is not to "honor his father" with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition (Matthew 15:4-6).

The Pharisees did not reject Scripture. On the contrary, they held Scripture in very high regard. But they valued their traditional interpretations of Scripture too highly by comparison. They should have compared these understandings to Scripture and found them lacking. But instead, the Pharisees accepted interpretations that did not align with the facts, goals, and means of Scripture. And so Jesus condemned them.

A problem that is related to revering human decisions more highly than Scripture is the endorsement of false interpretations. All human beings make mistakes. So, when we blindly endorse the decisions of others, we inevitably endorse some mistakes. This is particularly problematic when the church itself advocates false interpretations. At times, such false interpretations are even enforced by church discipline.

For example, at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, the church officially and rightly refuted the heresy of Arianism, which denied the doctrine of the Trinity. However, at the Second Council of Sirmium in A.D. 357, the church changed its position and affirmed Arianism. And several local councils confirmed this move in subsequent years. During this time, Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, was repeatedly exiled for opposing Arianism. At the time, he was considered a heretic for holding to views of the Trinity that we now consider to be orthodox.

In summary, a strategy of human authority can have devastating results. Among other things, it can constitute a rejection of Scripture's unique authority, and it can lead to the endorsement of false doctrines. In these kinds of ways it obscures the truth of God's revelation, so that our duty is hidden from us.

Now that we have looked at the description and consequences of the strategy of human authority, let's discuss a corrective that can help us avoid this error.

Correctives

The corrective is fairly simple, and that is that we must always maintain the supremacy of Scripture as our ultimate revealed norm. The church and its traditions are lesser authorities over us, and they really can help us understand Scripture. But they

cannot bind our consciences the way Scripture does. As Jesus demonstrated in his arguments with the Pharisees, our obligation is to obey the words of Scripture according to their original meaning.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 1, section 10 presents a useful summary of this idea. Listen to its words:

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 Scriptures are the very words of God. And no human tradition or interpretation can speak with the unquestionable authority of God. So, we must submit to what we believe Scripture to reveal through its facts, goals, and means.

Practically speaking, this means that we should measure every human judgment against Scripture. Rather than being satisfied simply to accept fallible human judgments — even the church’s judgments — we must search the Scriptures to see if the things these authorities say are true. This was the very thing for which Luke praised the Christians in the city of Berea in Acts 17:11:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11).

Like the Bereans, we must always test human testimonies and doctrines by the standard of Scripture. No mere creature — not even the apostle Paul — is so authoritative or accurate in and of himself that we should rely on his word above that of Scripture.

Predispositions toward laxity, rigor, and human authority offer easy but untrustworthy answers to difficult questions. At first glance, it may even seem wise to err on the side of caution, or on the side of freedom, or on the side of tradition. But in reality, to err on the side of anything is still to err.

You see, when we overemphasize laxity or rigor or human authority, we ignore the facts, goals, and means of Scripture. And as a result, we don’t know our duty as we should so that we can’t conform ourselves to God’s character. And this is why we must always try to discover and submit to the original meaning of Scripture.

Having looked into the situational content of revelation, the nature of revelation itself, and some popular strategies toward the situational dimensions of revelation, we are now prepared to consider the issues that come to the foreground in the application of revelation to the modern world. How do the facts we find in the modern world help us to know our obligations to God? And how is our duty influenced by the facts of our own situations?

APPLICATION OF REVELATION

You will recall that our model for making biblical decisions is: Ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. As this model indicates, we are wise to look at ethical decisions from three perspectives: the normative perspective of God's Word, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective. As we focus on the situational perspective in this lesson, we must always remind ourselves that to apply God's Word rightly, we need to know more than the content and nature of God's Word. We must also know something about our modern situation, the situation to which we are applying God's Word.

Now, God's Word is so sufficient that if we knew it exhaustively — if we knew every way that special, general, and existential revelation reflect his character — we would always know precisely what to do. After all, each perspective on ethics ultimately includes the others. So, if we were able to see every ethical implication of the normative perspective, we would not gain any new insight by considering the situational and existential perspectives.

But in reality, our knowledge of God's norms is not exhaustive. Rather, God's word provides us with limited information about God's character. This revelation is sufficient for all our ethical endeavors, not because it *tells us* precisely what to do in every instance, but because it provides us with enough information about God's character to *figure out* what to do in every instance. And a very important part of figuring out what to do is understanding the circumstances to which we are applying God's word.

Our discussion of the application of revelation will draw attention once again to three situational considerations: First, we will consider the need to understand the facts of our modern circumstances. Second, we will focus on modern goals. And third, we will consider the modern means by which God permits us to pursue these modern goals. And throughout each of these sections, we will demonstrate our points by appealing to the biblical laws regarding food. Let's begin with the facts of our modern circumstances.

FACTS

The important point we want to make in this section is that changes in facts require changes in the application of God's Word. And to prove this idea, we will look at the way Scripture itself makes use of this principle. In particular, we will explore three different historical periods: the days of the Exodus under Moses; the days when national Israel inhabited the Promised Land; and the days of the New Testament church after Christ's ascension into heaven.

Now, it is important to strike a balance as we consider the facts of these three periods. There are both similarities and differences to be remembered. On the one hand, there are many similarities between all three of these periods with respect to the character of God. God's character is immutable — it cannot change. And so, in each of these periods of history, the fact of God's existence and the particular attributes of God's character remained the same. For another thing, in each of these time periods humanity was fallen and sinful, desperately needing moral guidance from God. And with specific

regard to food, we find the similarity that in each of these periods food was to be eaten for God's glory. And this factual situation remains true in our day as well.

But on the other hand, Scripture makes it clear that there are also differences between the facts in these three periods so that some actions that were counted as sinful in some periods are not in other periods.

Let's consider how the facts related to food changed throughout history. In the days of the Exodus, the people of Israel were governed by relatively strict laws, being permitted to eat only clean animals in particular ways. As just one example, according to Leviticus 17:3-4, during their travels to the Land of Promise, it was sinful for the Israelites to slaughter and eat certain clean animals unless they were first presented as an offering to the Lord at the tabernacle.

But when the Israelites were well established and spread throughout the Promised Land, the Scriptures make it clear that they were governed by relatively relaxed laws. In fact, Moses himself anticipated this later situation. According to Deuteronomy 12:15, when the Israelites settled in the land, they would be permitted to slaughter and eat any clean animal in their own towns without presenting it to the Lord at the place of worship.

And after Jesus' atoning death and ascension into heaven, the church was governed by permissive laws regarding diet. As we learn through Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16, God declared all animals to be clean, so as not to pose a stumbling block to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church.

And the reality is that these factual similarities and differences influenced ethical judgments. Insofar as the facts were the same, the judgments based on these facts were also the same. For example, one judgment that remained the same was the judgment that God is good. And another was the judgment that humanity is sinful, and food must still be eaten to God's glory. These and many other ethical judgments were relatively unchanged throughout these periods because the facts on which they were based remained unchanged.

But insofar as the facts were different in each period, the ethical judgments were also different. During the Exodus, with regard to certain animals, the judgment was to be "eat only clean animals that have been offered to God." In the Promised Land the judgment was to be "eat only clean animals." And in the period of the New Testament church, it was to be "eat any animal." In each period God's character remained the same, but the obligations his character placed on behavior varied in light of the changing circumstances.

Now, as we look at these similarities and differences, we can see that they are instructive for modern Christians. In broad terms, the same facts are shared in common in all ages. God's existence and God's character have not changed, and humanity is still fallen and sinful, and food must still be eaten to God's glory. And as a result, the judgments that God is good, humanity is sinful, and glorify God with food must still be affirmed.

But how should we judge dietary sinfulness in light of the factual changes that have occurred? Well, there are many differences between our facts and those of Israel in the days of the Exodus and Israel's life in the Promised Land. During the Exodus, strict laws applied leading to a judgment to eat only clean animals that have been offered to God. And in the Promised Land, relaxed laws applied leading to a judgment to eat only

clean animals. We can and must learn from these laws as Christians today, but they are not in force in the same ways in our day, and therefore their applications have changed.

On this issue, our circumstances parallel those of the early church. So, dietary sinfulness should still be reckoned according to permissive laws. Acts 10:9-16, as well as other passages such as 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14, teach us that the judgment to eat any animal continues to be normative for the church. To demonstrate that point, let's look at just one passage that makes this teaching clear. Listen to Paul's words in 1 Timothy 4:2-5:

Hypocritical liars ... order [people] to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For 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 4:2-5).

To one degree or another, every ethical judgment requires us to identify the similarities and differences between the modern facts and the biblical facts and to render ethical judgments accordingly. However, on the matter of food, the situational similarities between the New Testament church and the modern world indicate that we should generally follow the example set by the New Testament church.

Now that we have seen how important it is to consider the similarities and differences between the facts in the Bible and the facts in our own lives, we should turn to the question of goals in the lives of modern Christians.

GOALS

Let's consider once more the dietary laws from the times of the Exodus, Israel's life in the Promised Land, and the New Testament church.

In the days of Moses the purposes of the dietary laws included honoring the holiness of God and ensuring the sanctification of his people in his service. The goal was human holiness that mirrored God's holiness. For example, in Leviticus 11:44-45 the Lord told his people:

Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground... [B]e holy, because I am holy. (Leviticus 11:44-45)

And these rather general goals continued to be in effect throughout the periods of the Exodus, Israel's life in the Promised Land, and the church, even though the dietary laws were changed in these later periods. For instance, in Isaiah 62:12, the prophet encouraged the people in the Promised Land to strive after holiness, so that they might come to be called:

The Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord (Isaiah 62:12).

And in 1 Peter 1:15-16, the apostle wrote these words to the church:

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

In fact, when Peter instructed Christians to be holy, he quoted from the dietary law we just read in Leviticus 11:44-45.

But despite these similarities, each period also had particular goals for holiness that differed from the goals in other periods. During the Exodus, one goal was to separate Jews from Gentiles. And the same goal was maintained while Israel lived in the Promised Land.

But in the New Testament church, the circumstances changed when God converted many Gentiles. At that point, the goal was no longer to separate Jews from Gentiles, but to unite Jews with Gentiles in the church.

And necessarily, the correspondence between the goals of God’s glory and our holiness in these periods resulted in correspondence among the ethical judgments in all three periods. With regard to similar judgments, the goal of human holiness that mirrored God’s holiness was affirmed in all periods. And as a result, the ethical judgments that God is holy and that humanity must strive to be holy were rightly affirmed as well.

At the same time, each period also contained ethical judgments that were different from the judgments in other periods. In the days of the Exodus, the goal for Jews to separate from Gentiles led to the judgment to refuse invitations to eat Gentile food. And this judgment would have been echoed during Israel’s time in the Promised Land. But the proper judgment for the New Testament church was to accept invitations to eat Gentile food. After all, this was precisely what God had commanded Peter to do in Acts 10. In each period God’s character remained the same. But the goals implied by his character were somewhat different.

Now, as we look at these similarities and differences, we can see that they are instructive for modern Christians. With regard to similarities, we should still affirm the goals of God’s glory and our holiness. And this should still lead us to the judgments that God is holy and that humanity must strive to be holy. In these ways, the goals and judgments in the modern world reflect those of the ancient world.

But we must also consider differences between modern goals and judgments on the one hand, and goals and judgments in Scripture on the other hand. During the Exodus, the goal was to separate Jews from Gentiles, and this led to the judgment to refuse invitations to eat Gentile food. And during Israel’s time in the Promised Land, the same goal and judgment applied. But in the New Testament church’s day, the goal was to unite Jews with Gentiles, leading to the judgment to accept invitations to eat Gentile food.

The modern church is still to consist of Jewish and Gentile believers, so the goals of our situation are different from those in the periods of the Exodus and of the Promised Land. Consequently, we should not make the same judgments they made. But our goals are similar to those of the New Testament church. And as a result, our judgment should be the same as theirs so that we also accept invitations to eat Gentile food.

Again, every ethical judgment requires us to consider the modern goals in light of the biblical goals and to focus on the similarities and differences between them. Where

there are significant differences, we should hesitate to adopt the same judgments. But where there is significant similarity, we should accept the ethical judgments.

In some cases, such as the matter of food, our judgments will be different from those made in the Old Testament but very similar to those made by the New Testament church. But in other ethical matters, we may determine that even the judgments made by the New Testament church are inappropriate for our modern setting.

Having looked at the importance of correspondence with regard to facts and goals, we should turn to our final topic: the correspondence between the means approved in Scripture and the means available to us in the modern world.

MEANS

Let's turn one last time to the dietary laws from the periods of the Exodus under Moses, Israel's life in the Promised Land, and the New Testament church in order to illustrate the importance of considering similarities and differences of means.

On the one hand, the similarity between the means in the days of the Exodus, life in the Promised Land, and the New Testament church is fairly basic. Simply put, the people were to use diet to achieve holiness in all three periods.

The differences, however, are more extensive. For instance, during the Exodus the means of striving for holiness through diet included the need to sacrifice animals at the tabernacle before eating them. This means of regulation worked well during the time that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. During those days, the entire nation lived in the vicinity of the tabernacle. Moreover, Exodus 16:35 indicates that their diet primarily consisted of manna, not of meat from domestic animals.

But in the Promised Land, many lived far from the tabernacle, and far from the temple that Solomon later built in Jerusalem. Moreover, God had ceased providing manna, and the people were eating more domestic animals. So, in Deuteronomy 12:15 God adapted his requirements to fit the new circumstances of his people's lives. Specifically, he permitted the people to slaughter animals in their own towns. He still required holiness, but he gave the people a new means to fulfill this requirement.

As we have seen, the requirements changed again in the days of the New Testament church. As God's kingdom spread to lands, peoples and cultures beyond Israel, there was a great influx of Gentiles into the church. As a result, holiness no longer required those of Jewish descent to remain separate from those of Gentile descent. Rather, as Peter learned in Acts 10:9-16, holiness now required them to unite with regard to their diets in order that all Christians might fellowship with one another. Appropriately, God used a change to an unrestricted diet to create unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

And just as we saw with facts and goals, the correspondence between means throughout these time periods was manifested in ethical judgments. Insofar as the means were similar, one valid judgment could have been that food should be used in ways that honor the holiness of God and sanctify his people in his service.

But insofar as the means were different, different judgments should have been rendered regarding other aspects of diet. During the Exodus, the means was to sacrifice animals at the tabernacle. And this should have led to the judgment that animals must be

sacrificed at the tabernacle before eating them. In the Promised Land, the means was to slaughter animals in towns, and this should have led to the judgment to slaughter clean animals. And in the New Testament church, the means of an unrestricted diet should have produced the statement “eat what the Gentiles eat” as an appropriate ethical judgment.

And modern Christians have much to learn from these similarities and differences. Because of the similarities the modern world has to the periods of the Exodus, Israel’s life in the Promised Land, and the New Testament church, we should echo their determination to use diet to achieve holiness. And this means should lead us to affirm the ethical judgment that food should be used in ways that honor the holiness of God and build holiness in his people, even in the modern world.

We can also learn from the differences between the means used in these periods of history. We do not live near the tabernacle as God’s people did during the Exodus when the means was to sacrifice animals at the tabernacle and the judgment was that animals must be sacrificed at the tabernacle. And we do not live in an entirely Jewish nation that must remain distinct from Gentiles as was the case in the Promised Land when the means was to slaughter animals in towns and the judgment was to slaughter clean animals before eating them. So, we should not use the means that God’s people employed in these periods or render judgments based on those means.

But consider the New Testament church. They used the means of an unrestricted diet and made the judgment to eat what the Gentiles eat in order to pursue unity within the church. And because our situation is essentially the same as theirs, we should use the same means and render the same judgment.

As with facts and goals, there will be some cases in which the situation of the New Testament church differs from our own so that we cannot always use the same means and render the same judgments that the New Testament church did.

Every norm revealed to us must be applied with diligence and wisdom and not with simple imitation of the behavior in Scripture. And we can determine which means are appropriate to use in the modern world by looking at the correspondence between the situations described in the Bible and the situations of our own lives.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have investigated four topics that help us understand the relationship between revelation and situation as we seek to know our duty before God. We have explored the content of revelation as it pertains to situations, the situational nature of revelation itself, several popular interpretive strategies toward revelation, and the application of revelation to our modern situations. And we have seen that in order to make biblical decisions, we must consider the ways that each one of these situational factors contributes to our knowledge of our duty.

As believers who want to make ethical decisions, it is very important for us to understand our ethical situation. And as we have seen, it is helpful to think of our situation in terms of facts, goals, and means. By paying attention to these concerns, we can better understand God’s revelation. And when we do, we will be better prepared to make judgments that conform to the biblical model for making ethical decisions.

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
SIX

THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
PURSUING OUR GOAL



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Six

The Situational Perspective: Pursuing Our Goal

INTRODUCTION

A young soccer player in my church recently wrote an article that appeared in our local newspaper. In the article, he described soccer — or “football” as it is known in most parts of the world — as consisting of long periods of continuous play with very few goals. He went so far as to say that an ideal soccer match often ends in a score of one to zero.

Well, in some sense, ethical Christian living is a bit like an ideal soccer game. In the final analysis, we are in pursuit of a single grand goal — namely the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. But this is not a goal we can reach instantly. In fact, God’s people have been striving toward this goal for thousands of years, and we have yet to reach it. Nevertheless, all our thoughts, words, and deeds should contribute to the goal of glorifying God through the triumph of his kingdom.

This is the sixth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it “The Situational Perspective: Pursuing our Goal.” In this lesson, we will focus on the overarching goal that God has laid before us, namely, the success and triumph of his kingdom as it spreads from heaven to cover the whole earth.

Throughout these lessons, we have emphasized that ethical judgment involves the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person. This summary highlights the fact that there are three essential aspects to consider in any ethical question, namely, God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision.

These three concerns of ethical judgment correspond to three perspectives that we should take toward ethical issues: the normative perspective, which focuses on God’s revealed norms; the situational perspective, which concentrates on the importance of situations and circumstances; and the existential perspective, which directs attention to human beings.

In the previous lesson we introduced the situational perspective on Christian ethics by emphasizing how important it is to understand the facts of our situation. And beyond this, we also saw that two kinds of facts play a special role in ethics: the goals we seek to accomplish, and the means we use to reach these goals. In this lesson, we are turning our attention to just one of these situational considerations: the goals of Christian ethics. Specifically, we will focus on the kingdom of God as the ultimate or final goal of Christian ethics.

Our lesson will divide into three main sections. First, we will explore the circumstances of the kingdom of God, answering questions like, what is the kingdom and how does it manifest itself in history? Second, we will consider life in the kingdom, focusing on our personal experiences within the kingdom of God and evaluating them in terms of the general goals that God has set for us. And third, we will describe the program for the kingdom, looking at some of the more specific and immediate goals God

has ordained as means to reaching the overarching goal of the kingdom. Let's begin by turning to the circumstances of the kingdom of God.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE KINGDOM

We will discuss three aspects of the circumstances of the kingdom. First, we will explain the importance of the kingdom of God, and show why it is proper to say that God's kingdom is the ultimate goal of Christian ethics. Second, we will identify the components of the kingdom, the constituent parts of the reign of God. And third, we will explore the development of the kingdom, the ways it has progressed throughout history. Let's first turn our attention to the importance of God's kingdom.

IMPORTANCE OF THE KINGDOM

As we have mentioned in prior lessons, ethical judgment always has the proper goal in mind. And as we have said repeatedly, the highest goal of ethics is the glory of God. But what we also need to realize is that God's glory is manifested in his kingship and his kingdom.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture reveals that God is the king over all creation. And it teaches that the ultimate goal of history is to display God's kingship through the reign of Christ. In this sense, we can think of God's kingdom as the overarching story of the whole Bible.

Scripture teaches that God is most glorified through the establishment and triumph of his kingdom in Christ. That is to say, he will be most greatly honored when he is acknowledged by all creatures as the supreme creator God, the king over all. Paul had this ultimate end of history in mind in 1 Timothy 1:17 where he offered this doxology:

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17).

So, when we speak of the glory of God as the highest goal of ethics, we are also saying that the kingdom of God is the highest goal of ethics. Now, the Scriptures have many things to say about the kingdom of God as the goal of Christian ethics. But to introduce this subject, we'll focus on some of the ways that Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5–7.

We'll consider three specific times when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as the goal of ethics during his Sermon on the Mount. First, we'll look at his discussion of the kingdom of God in the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon. Second, we'll consider the Lord's Prayer. And third, we'll focus on Jesus' teachings about earthly needs. In each of these sections, Jesus indicated that the kingdom of God must be the main priority of our lives. Let's begin with the Beatitudes, found in Matthew 5:3-12.

Beatitudes

A beatitude is a statement about blessedness. Accordingly, Jesus' statements Matthew 5:3-12 are called "beatitudes" because they each begin with the phrase "blessed are." These beatitudes list many things that God blesses.

Jesus' teachings on blessedness are important to our study of ethics because, as you will recall, we have defined Christian ethics as:

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

By this definition, whatever God blesses is morally good and right. So, with the Beatitudes, Jesus began his Sermon by encouraging people to live ethically. And significantly, he described blessings and ethics in terms of the kingdom of God. Consider just a few of the more obvious examples of this:

- In Matthew 5:3 the blessing was "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This same blessing was repeated in verse 10. Although Matthew used the phrase "kingdom of *heaven*" here, many scholars have noted that this term is unique to Matthew's gospel and that it means the same thing as "kingdom of God."
- In verse 5 the blessing was "they will inherit the earth." This was also a kingdom blessing because it referred to the new earth that God will create when his kingdom comes in all its fullness.
- And in verse 9 the blessing was "they will be called sons of God." Even this statement of blessedness refers to the kingship and kingdom of God. In the days of the Bible, human kings were often called "father" by their subjects. And the same is true in the Scriptures; God is often called our father because he is our royal father. So, in this verse Jesus taught that God will be the royal father, the loving king of his blessed children.

In one way or another, each of these blessings Jesus mentioned was closely related to the concept of the kingdom of God. And Jesus specifically set forth the blessings of God's kingdom as the reward or goal that was to motivate his listeners to live ethically. He presented the kingdom of God as an essential focus for Christian ethics.

Lord's Prayer

Besides the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, found in Matthew 6:9-13, also focuses on the kingdom of God as the goal for ethics. Listen to the beginning of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-10:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10).

All four of these statements have a kingdom focus.

In the address, “Our Father in heaven,” God is acknowledged as our father, but notice that he is specifically described as our father in heaven. The image of heaven throughout the Bible is the same: it is God’s throne room. So, when Jesus told his disciples to pray “Our Father in heaven,” he had in mind that they pray to God as their royal father, the divine King enthroned in heaven, the great father of his empire.

In the first petition, “hallowed be your name,” Jesus instructed his disciples to revere God’s name. Scripture often equates God’s name with his person and authority. In the context of the Lord’s Prayer, this is a petition that all creatures would bow to God because of his unsurpassed kingly authority.

In the second petition, “your kingdom come,” Jesus exhorted his disciples to pray for the fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth. This was in keeping with his teaching that God is extending his heavenly kingdom to earth.

In the third petition, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus indicated that all creatures in heaven already obey God’s will. But Jesus instructed us to pray that all creatures on earth would obey the divine King in the same way. So, once again we see that Jesus set forth the kingdom of God as a high priority for Christian ethics.

Earthly Needs

Now that we have looked at the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer, we are ready to turn to Jesus’ teachings about earthly needs. This passage appears in Matthew 6:25-34.

Everyone has earthly needs, such as food and clothing. But Jesus taught that we should not experience anxiety over these issues. Instead, we should focus on God’s kingdom. Listen to Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:31-33:

Do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” ... your heavenly Father knows that you need [these things]. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:31-33).

It is not wrong to give proper attention to earthly needs like food and clothing. But here Jesus made it strikingly clear that seeking the kingdom of God is not just one of many goals we have as followers of Christ. Of all the goals we have in life, our first or primary concern should be the glorification of God through the triumph of his kingdom on earth.

So, we see that on several occasions in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it very plain that the ultimate goal of the Christian life, the greatest end toward which we are to strive, is the glorification of God through the triumph of his kingdom.

Having seen the importance of the kingdom of God as the goal of Christian ethics, we should examine the components of the kingdom to find out more precisely what its essential elements are.

COMPONENTS OF THE KINGDOM

There are many ways to describe the kingdom of God, but we will speak of three main components of the kingdom. First, we will speak of the role of the king. Second, we will turn to the people or citizens of the kingdom. And third, we will look at the covenants that govern the relationship between the king and his people. Let's begin with the role of the king within the kingdom.

King

Modern people often have a difficult time understanding what it means to say that God is the ruler of his kingdom because many of us have never lived under the authority of a human king. But in the ancient world of the Bible, people were very familiar with kings and kingdoms. In those days kings were expected to fulfill their responsibilities to the citizens of their countries. They were to protect and provide for them, and to treat them with kindness. Kings also had the legal authority to tax, to raise armies, and to regulate many aspects of life. Good kings ruled wisely to benefit their people. They worked hard to protect them from foreign powers as well as from natural and domestic problems.

In the Bible, God is frequently presented as the suzerain, or supreme emperor, over all creation. And all the kings of the earth are his vassals, or servant kings, living on earth but rendering tribute to their superior in heaven. For instance, we read these words in Psalm 103:19:

The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all (Psalm 103:19).

And Psalm 47:9 declares:

The kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted (Psalm 47:9).

God's supreme rule as the king over all is a major theme that runs throughout the Bible.

Although as the creator, God is king over all nations, the Scriptures also teach that he was king in a special way over Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. In fact, when God established the throne of David over Israel, David's throne represented the authority and power of God himself. Listen to the way that 1 Chronicles 29:23 speaks of Israel's human king:

Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king in place of his father David (1 Chronicles 29:23).

Notice that both David and Solomon sat *on the throne of the Lord* in Jerusalem. The throne still belonged to God, so that the human kings of Israel sat on it only as his vassals.

And in Matthew 5:34-35 Jesus confirmed that this was still the case in his day. Listen to the instruction he gave regarding oaths:

Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King (Matthew 5:34-35).

God ruled over Israel from his throne in heaven, and Jerusalem was still the earthly capital of his kingdom.

Now that we have seen that God is the king over all creation and king in a special way over Israel and the church, we should turn our attention to the people or citizens who live in God's kingdom.

People

Since God is the emperor over all creation, there is a sense in which his reign has always been over every living person. But when the Bible speaks about the people of God's kingdom, it is usually referring to the people that God has called to himself in contrast to the people of the world who follow the ways of evil. The Old Testament commonly speaks this way about Abraham and his descendants. And the New Testament generally uses this language to speak about the church, since Christians of all races have been adopted into the family of Abraham in Christ.

When God created the world, he set up humanity as his vassal kings. He appointed Adam and Eve and the children they were to have to rule over all creation as his servant kings. It was their job to govern all the animals, as well as themselves, for the success of God's kingdom. Listen to David's words in Psalm 8 verses 5 and 6:

You ... crowned [man] with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands (Psalm 8:5-6).

Referring to the creation account in Genesis chapter 1, David indicated that humanity had been crowned and appointed ruler over the whole world and all its inhabitants. In short, God made human beings his vassal kings over creation.

In Genesis itself, we also learn that part of humanity's job was to make the whole world resemble the Garden of Eden. When God created the world, everything was good, but the only place that God planted in a manner fit for human habitation was the Garden of Eden. As we read in Genesis 2:8-9:

The Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food (Genesis 2:8-9).

The Garden was prepared for human beings and populated by human beings. And it was humanity's appointment as vassal kings to spread this pattern throughout the world. God stated this clearly in Genesis 1:28 where he gave this instruction to our first parents:

Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28).

So, we see that it was humanity's responsibility to populate the whole world, filling it with citizens of God's kingdom, and to improve it as God had improved the Garden of Eden.

So then, from the very beginning, God's kingdom was Adam global in its focus and destiny. God ruled directly over all humanity, and he intended the entire world to be his kingdom. And this continued from the time of Adam and Eve until the days of Abraham, who lived about 2,000 years before Christ. We read about this in Genesis 17:6 where the Lord made the following promise to Abraham:

I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you (Genesis 17:6).

In the days of Abraham, God narrowed his focus to a national level, concentrating on Abraham's descendants as his special kingdom within his broader rule of the world. This national focus culminated in Jesus, the final vassal king over God's people on earth.

Jesus spoke of his kingship in many places, such as Matthew 27:11 where we read of his conversation with Pilate:

Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied (Matthew 27:11).

Under the kingship of Jesus, the focus of God's kingdom became ecclesiastical, meaning that it was centered on the church. Through the gospel, salvation spread so successfully beyond the people and borders of Israel that the centerpiece of God's kingdom was no longer a single nation but the church throughout the world. God's kingdom now includes people from every race and continues to spread to the ends of the earth.

For example, consider Revelation 5:9-10 where the heavenly song praising Jesus includes these words:

With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).

Having spoken of the king and the people, we should mention a third component of the kingdom: the covenants that govern the relationships between them.

Covenants

In the ancient world, suzerain kings often administered their great empires by imposing covenants or treaties upon vassal nations and their kings. These covenants typically mentioned the suzerain's goodwill toward the vassal, listed the vassal's obligations toward the suzerain, and stated the consequences of obedience or disobedience to these obligations.

Similarly, throughout the Bible, God administered his kingdom through covenants. His covenants expressed God's goodwill toward his people, listed the people's obligations toward God, and stated the consequences of obedience or disobedience to these obligations, specifically, blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

It is common to speak of six major covenants between God and his people. The Bible speaks of God's covenant with Adam in Hosea 6:7; the covenant with Noah in Genesis 6 and 9; the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17; the covenant through Moses primarily in Exodus 19-24; the covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalms 89 and 132; and the final covenant in Christ in places like Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 12:23-29. These covenants were never at odds with each other. Rather, they successively administered and governed God's kingdom as it grew throughout history. From the very beginning God's relationship with humanity has been governed by covenant. The covenantal nature of God's relationship to his people continued throughout the Old Testament in the history of Israel. And even the Christian faith of the New Testament is explained in terms of the new covenant in Christ.

Understanding that God has always administered his kingdom through his covenant is very important for Christian ethics. To put it in terms of our lessons, biblical covenants indicate the facts of our situation — that God is our king and that we are his kingdom servants. They establish the kinds of kingdom goals God blesses, and they delineate many of the means we are to use to achieve the goals that he blesses. In short, our covenant relationship with God helps us understand how each aspect of our lives should work to bring glory to our great king.

Now that we have explored the importance of the kingdom of God as the goal of Christian ethics and looked at the components of the kingdom, we should turn briefly to the historical development of the kingdom, the contours that God's kingdom has exhibited and will exhibit throughout history.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE KINGDOM

It has been a longstanding tradition to summarize the Bible's story in terms of three historical phases: creation, fall, and redemption. And we will follow this same basic outline. But we will call these phases by different names in order to highlight our kingdom emphasis. We will speak of the phase of creation as the time when the kingdom was in a state of initial peace. We will refer to humanity's fall into sin as humanity's rebellion against the divine King. And we will speak of the phase of redemption as a time

of final peace that exceeds the initial peace of creation as God brings his kingdom to its glorious fulfillment.

We will address these three phases in historical order, beginning with initial peace, continuing with humanity's rebellion, and concluding with the time of final peace of the kingdom. Let's turn our attention first to the period of initial peace.

Initial Peace

In the beginning, when God created the world, humanity lived in perfect harmony with God. Adam and Eve were obedient servants. And as a result, there was peace between God and humanity.

As we have seen, during this period God appointed human beings to serve as his vassal kings. And at first, humanity fulfilled this role well in perfect accordance with their obligations toward God. As a result, Adam and Eve were blessed with close fellowship with God and continued to live in the Garden of Eden where life was blissful and easy.

In fact, the rest of Scripture often looks back to this garden setting as a time of great peace and prosperity. For example, in Isaiah 51:3 we read these words:

The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing (Isaiah 51:3).

During the time of peace in the Garden of Eden, human life was full of joy and gladness, of thanksgiving and singing. In this initial period the rest of the world was undeveloped. But in the garden, where human society existed, there was great peace.

And as we read in Genesis 3, this was a world in which work and child bearing were relatively easy and full of joy. No enemy threatened war; no animals threatened violence; no sickness threatened health; no drought or flood or fire threatened to destroy homes and crops. But rather, God cared tenderly for Adam and Eve and even walked and met with them in the cool of the garden.

In short, this was a world in which all the components of the covenant worked properly to favor humanity. God, the great king, had shown incredible goodwill toward his people by creating them, placing them in an idyllic garden and giving them authority over all creation. With regard to human obligations, the Lord required them to serve him and to obey him. And they did so without flaw. And with regard to consequences, humanity's obedience resulted in great blessings from God. This was the way God created the world for humanity, and this is still the way the world is meant to be.

Sadly, the history of God's kingdom goes beyond this period of initial peace to a time of rebellion against God — a time when humanity broke their covenant obligations to the great king, and mutinied against him.

Rebellion

We all know the story of humanity's initial rebellion against God. Genesis 3 records that the serpent tempted Eve to eat from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and Eve gave in to the temptation. She also gave some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it too. By sinning in this way, humanity violated one of their covenant obligations. And as a result, they received the covenant curses.

In response to their rebellion, God threw Adam and Eve out of the Garden and forced them to live in a world where the ground was hard to work, where childbirth was painful, where sickness and famine and wild animals and war threatened them and their children. They were still bound by the covenant obligations, but now they were experiencing the negative consequences of failing in these obligations.

And this rebellion has characterized the world throughout history. Humanity has continued to rebel against the great king, and God has continued to punish humanity with covenant curses. He destroyed the whole world with a flood in Noah's day. He allowed disease and nature and war to ravage humanity throughout its generations. And throughout it all, humanity did not learn its lesson. Instead of turning to God in repentance and keeping our covenant obligations, we continued to rebel and to perpetuate the covenant curses. But mercifully, God did not abandon us to rebellion and curse. Instead, he determined to bring final peace to his kingdom, to return blessing to his people.

Final Peace

In small ways, God began to restore peace to his kingdom immediately after humanity's fall into sin. As we see in Genesis 3, God did not immediately strike Adam and Eve dead when they sinned. Instead, he allowed them to live. And in the midst of cursing them, he presented the first offer of the gospel to them. Listen to God's words to the serpent in Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).

Here, God explained that the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent's head. Theologians commonly call this the *protoevangelion*, or "first gospel," because it was the first time in history that God offered to send a redeemer to rescue humanity from the curse of sin.

In this sense, throughout the history of the world after the Fall, God was working toward the goal of the full redemption and success of his kingdom. The Old Testament tells us that the gospel was in operation reconciling some people to God and establishing peace between God and his redeemed people. But even though God always maintained a people who were faithful to him throughout the Old Testament, he did not restore his kingdom to the glory it had displayed during the days of initial peace.

But during the earthly ministry of Christ, the restoration of peace took a huge leap forward as it reached the last stages of its fulfillment. Jesus was the redeemer toward whom the entire Old Testament pointed. He came to earth as God's vassal king in order to reestablish a faithful kingdom on earth and to spread God's heavenly kingdom over the whole world. He is continuing that work now. And when he comes again in glory, Jesus will complete the restoration of the kingdom, bringing the whole world into glorious final peace with our divine King.

Now that we have explored the circumstances of the kingdom of God, we are ready to turn to our second major topic: life in the kingdom of God. In this section, we will focus on the twofold goal God has assigned to us within his kingdom.

LIFE IN THE KINGDOM

Earlier in this lesson we showed that the most important ethical goal for us to pursue is the glory of God through the triumph of his kingdom. At this point, we will consider some practical implications of this goal, especially as it pertains to our lives as citizens of God's kingdom. In particular, we will be looking for answers to the question: What kinds of goals are we to pursue as we seek God's kingdom?

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* offers significant guidance for our goals in life in its first question and answer. In response to the question:

What is the chief end of man?

The catechism answers:

Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

You'll notice that the catechism describes a twofold goal. On the one hand, it says that we are to pursue the glory to God. And on the other hand, we are to pursue the enjoyment of God forever.

Our discussion of the twofold goal of the kingdom of God will follow this same division. First, we will consider what it means to glorify God as our Divine King. And second, we will talk about what it means to enjoy God in his kingdom. Let's begin with the goal of glorifying God as our divine King.

GLORIFY GOD

In this section, we will explore the idea that God is glorified primarily through the triumph of his kingdom, and we will do this in two parts. First, we'll define the glory of God, and second we'll consider the matter of the glorification of God. Let us begin with the glory of God.

Glory of God

Scripture uses the word “glory” — or *kavod* in Hebrew and *doxa* in Greek — to say several different things about God. Very often, God’s “glory” is his appearance, especially the cloud of light that surrounds him as in Exodus 24:17 or Ezekiel 10:4. But when we speak of the glory of God as the goal of ethics, we are not thinking primarily in terms of his appearance. Rather, we are more concerned with God’s fame or reputation, especially the fame he receives through his powerful works. For instance, in Exodus 14:4 God spoke these words:

But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord (Exodus 14:4).

In this passage, God indicated that the recognition of his glory, that is, his fame or reputation, would increase when the Egyptians saw that his power had defeated them. They would resent his glory, but they would still have to acknowledge it.

In a related sense to God’s fame and reputation, we are also interested in God’s glory in terms of honor and praise that is given to him. Unlike the Egyptians who resented God’s glorious works of power, Christians are to appreciate God’s power and to increase his fame and reputation by proclaiming his deeds and giving him thanks. For instance, this is the meaning of “glory” in Psalm 29:1-2, where we read these words:

Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness (Psalm 29:1-2).

As just one example, listen to the words of Revelation 4:9-11:

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Revelation 4:9-11).

Three times in this short passage we are told that God receives this worship while seated on his royal throne. And this is the consistent picture throughout Scripture.

Now that we have seen what the glory of God is and how it relates to his kingship, we should turn to the glorification of God. In this section, we will be asking questions like: Why is God’s glory our goal? And, how can we increase our divine king’s glory?

Glorification of God

Most fundamentally, human beings are obligated to glorify God because he is our king. And as our king, he has the right to demand our praise and worship. As the

Westminster Shorter Catechism indicates in its first question and answer, humanity's fundamental purpose is to increase the glory of God. And one of the best places to see this in Scripture is in the creation account, where God specifically stated his purpose for creating humanity. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image ... and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image... God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:26-28).

When God created humanity, he assigned us a purpose. And that purpose was to rule over the earth as his vassal kings, spreading his rule and the blessings of his kingdom throughout the whole world. And under the vassal kingship of Christ, that is still our purpose. We are to improve the world, increasing God's rule and blessings. And we are to multiply citizens within his kingdom, teaching them to acknowledge, honor and praise our great suzerain king. And as we fulfill this purpose, God's worthiness, fame and reputation increase. And in this way, his glory increases as well.

And we see this emphasis on God's glory repeated in many ways throughout Scripture. For example, the Psalms teach us to meditate on God's good works and power, which increases his reputation. And they teach us to sing about these things, which is a form of honoring and praising him.

And the historical books record many of God's works of power, mercy, and judgment. Through their records, they teach us to remember God's goodness and sovereignty, and they give us further reasons to praise him.

The prophetic books, in turn, teach us to hope in God's future glory. And this hope is to be our motivation to pursue righteousness in this life.

Moreover, in God's law, obedience to all God's commandments is actually equated with reverence for his glory. Listen to the way Moses summarized the law in Deuteronomy 28:58:

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 (Deuteronomy 28:58).

Essentially, Moses listed only *one* command here. But he described it in two ways. Simply put, revering God's glorious and awesome name is the same thing as carefully following all the words of his law. And this is because when we have a proper reverence for God and his glory, we express that reverence in obedience to all his commands.

Jesus taught this same idea in Matthew 22:37-40. Listen to his words there:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the

Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 to teach that the commandment to love God is the foundation of all the other commandments. And of course, loving God includes recognizing and affirming his worthiness, as well as appreciating and honoring him. In short, loving God is one important way of glorifying him.

Now, as important as it is for us to keep our hearts set on the goal of God's glory, glorifying God is only part of our twofold goal. We are also to enjoy God forever. So, let's explore this enjoyment of God that is such an important aspect of our chief goal.

ENJOY GOD

Now, when we speak of our own enjoyment as one of the primary goals of biblical ethics, some Christians are a bit surprised. After all, our standard for ethical living is supposed to be the character of God, not our own wants and desires. So, how are we to resolve this tension? How are we to reconcile our own desires for happiness with God's desire for a world that glorifies him and magnifies his kingship? Well, not surprisingly, the answer is that proper human enjoyment brings glory to God.

We will speak of two considerations that indicate that human enjoyment of God actually brings glory to God. First, we will consider the role of humanity in God's kingdom. And second, we will turn our attention to the role of the law that God gave to rule his kingdom. Let's begin by looking at God's purpose for humanity as a means of bringing glory to the divine King.

Role of Humanity

When God created the world, humanity's role was to populate and to rule over God's kingdom. But God did not simply want citizens who would serve him. God is a loving king. He is good and gracious and benevolent to us. And he wants us to love him. His ideal kingdom is not one in which we cower in fear of him and obey so that we can avoid punishment. Rather, in God's ideal kingdom everyone loves the Lord and shares fellowship with him and with his people.

Consider Romans 14:17, where Paul made the following point:

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

The people of God's kingdom should be characterized by joy and peace. In other words, they should enjoy the blessings that their God provides. And listen to these words that Jesus taught in Matthew 13:44:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field (Matthew 13:44).

God's kingdom is a cause for great joy. And the proper human response to the blessings of God's kingdom is happiness and enjoyment.

It is worth noting that Jesus gave this teaching in the context of explaining the coming day of God's judgment. On that day, those who are faithful to God will inherit tremendous glory — glory that far surpasses any price we might pay in this life. And because of this coming glory, we should rejoice in our present participation in the kingdom, knowing that we are laying up treasures in heaven.

Now that we have seen that proper human enjoyment brings glory to God because of the role of humanity in God's kingdom, we should turn to the role of the law, seeing how the rules of God's kingdom are designed and intended to bring us joy.

Role of the Law

God's law is the revealed standard by which he governs his kingdom, and we are obligated to live by it. And when we live according to the law, we receive the blessings God has intended for the obedient citizens of his kingdom. So, we can say that one role of the law is to instruct us to live in ways that lead to blessing and enjoyment.

Now of course, if we use the law wrongly, then we ask the law fulfill a role that God never intended for it. And that can lead to terrible consequences. For instance, if we try to gain salvation by keeping the law, the law will condemn us to death. This was Paul's point in Galatians 3:10 where he commented on the law with these words:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Galatians 3:10).

The law is a curse when we use it wrongly, such as when we try to earn salvation by our own good works rather than through the merit of Christ. And on several occasions, the Bible speaks in harshly negative terms about the *misuse* of the law.

But far more frequently, the Bible speaks of the *proper use* of God's law as a great blessing to humanity. And this should not be surprising. After all, the law reveals God to us, teaching us how to please him and how to obtain his blessings. In fact, Scripture commonly speaks of God's law as a delight, such as in Psalm 1:2, and as a gracious gift, as in Psalm 119:29. And it teaches that keeping the law results in the covenant blessings of God's kingdom, as in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. In short, the law was given for our good, for our prosperity, and for our joy. David summarized this view of the law Psalm 19:7-8 where he wrote these words:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart (Psalm 19:7-8).

God has given us rules to follow in order to produce joy in our lives. And those rules are his law. So, when we obey God's law, we enjoy him and we glorify him at the same time. We enjoy him because he blesses our obedience and because it pleases us to bring pleasure to the God we love. And our godly joy brings glory to God by fulfilling his purpose, by acknowledging his worth, and by expressing thanks toward him. In all of these ways, the role of the Law shows us that enjoying God is an important part of God's goal for humanity.

Now of course, in our present world, our enjoyment of God is often hindered by our suffering. But we need to remember that in God's plan for us, our suffering is actually a means to our further enjoyment of God. Passages like Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-4, and 1 Peter 4:13 teach us that God uses suffering in the same way that a refiner uses fire to burn off the impurities of precious metals. In God's hands, our suffering is a tool that proves our faith and brings us to spiritual maturity, and that ultimately results in our joy.

Redeemed humanity's experience of joy is a critical element in God's plan for his kingdom. By looking at the role he has assigned to humanity, and at the role he assigned to his law within his kingdom, we can see that part of God's ultimate goal for his redeemed people is that we *enjoy* him. And our experiences of joy bring great glory to our divine King.

So far in this lesson, we have investigated the circumstances of the kingdom of God as well as life in God's kingdom. At this point, we are ready to turn our attention to our last main topic: the program for the kingdom of God. In this section, we will focus on more specific goals that God has assigned to the church as it builds the kingdom of God.

PROGRAM OF THE KINGDOM

In every age, God's plan for the world has been the same. It has always been his goal to establish his kingdom throughout the whole world by populating it with loyal and righteous citizens who turn the world into paradise for his glorious presence. But it is always important to remember that in every age God has given rather specific goals to tell his people how to accomplish this overarching goal.

In this section of our lesson, we will look closely at two such instructions that God gave to his people at critical stages in the world's history. First, we will consider the cultural mandate, which God gave to Adam and Eve when he created the world. And second, we will look at the Great Commission, which Jesus assigned to the church immediately after his resurrection. Let's turn first to the cultural mandate.

CULTURAL MANDATE

We will investigate the cultural mandate by looking at three considerations: First, we will offer a definition of the cultural mandate, explaining what it is and what it generally requires. Second, we will discuss the relationship between the cultural mandate

and the creation ordinances of marriage and labor. And third, we will look at the different applications of the cultural mandate throughout the historical development of the kingdom of God. Let's begin by defining what we mean when we speak of the cultural mandate.

Definition

In simple terms, the expression “cultural mandate” refers to God’s command that human beings expand his kingdom to the ends of the earth through the development of human culture. As we saw earlier in this lesson, when God created the world, he commanded humanity to fill and subdue the earth. We find this command in Genesis 1:28 where we read these words:

Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28).

We have already spoken about this command in terms of our obligation to spread God’s kingdom throughout the world. But theologians also refer to this as the cultural mandate because filling and subduing the earth involves building human cultures where none have existed before.

You will recall that when God created the world, the Garden of Eden was the only area that he turned into a perfect habitation for humanity, and the only place that was perfected enough for him to be present in his glory with humanity. It was humanity’s job to improve and populate the rest of the world, expanding the community of God’s people, and thus the place of God’s glorious kingdom presence, across the globe.

In this sense, the cultural mandate is the command to establish righteous, God-honoring human populations and societies, including the improvements to the world that accompany these societies. The focus of the cultural mandate is on populating an unpopulated world, building new societies, and turning the wild fields and wastelands of the world into beautiful, productive, life-giving gardens for the glory of God.

Now that we have seen a basic definition of the cultural mandate, we are ready to address our second topic: the creation ordinances of marriage and labor, which represent some of the central concerns of the cultural mandate.

Creation Ordinances

There are many ways that God conveys his commands to us. For instance, most of the commands recorded in Scripture are verbal. That is, they are conveyed by words. And God also reveals his commands to us through natural means, such as through the world around us, including nature as well as other human beings. But God’s commands can also be revealed through God’s acts of creation. A creation ordinance is a command that was revealed through God’s first acts of creation when he made the heavens and the earth.

As we have seen, the cultural mandate was a verbal command. Genesis 1:28 teaches us that God spoke the cultural mandate to humanity when he created them, commanding them to fill the earth and to subdue it.

And some of the same things that God spoke in the cultural mandate, he also revealed through the creation ordinances of marriage and labor. For instance, the creation ordinance of marriage is based on the purpose for which God created two genders, male and female.

We are all familiar with the basic elements of the marriage between Adam and Eve: First, Adam was created; then God made Eve from Adam's rib; and finally, God presented Eve to Adam, and they became husband and wife. But listen to the way Moses commented on the marriage between Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:24:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

Here, Moses indicated that God created both male and female human beings for the purpose of marriage, one man with one woman.

God's purposes in creation are expressions of God's character. As a result, they are normative for all human beings. And so, when we see that he created humanity in two genders for the purpose of marriage, we must conclude that humanity is obligated to engage in marriage and that marriage should be a union between one man and one woman. This does not mean that every individual is required to marry. But it does mean that the human race as a whole must perpetuate the godly institution of marriage.

And the creation ordinance of marriage directly relates to the cultural mandate's command to fill the earth, to be fruitful and multiply. Simply put, Scripture instructs that children are to be born within marriage, and therefore marriage is a prerequisite for the multiplication of human beings.

Similarly, there is a creation ordinance directly commanding us to labor, to expand God's kingdom throughout the earth. Listen to these details from Genesis 2:15, 18:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it... The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:15, 18).

Adam, the first man, was created in order to labor in God's garden. And his wife, Eve, was created in order to help him with this task.

So, when we read that God's purpose for humanity is that we labor on his behalf, we must conclude that we are morally obligated to labor on God's behalf. And this creation ordinance of labor directly relates to the cultural mandate's command to subdue the earth, that is, to establish human societies throughout the world. After all, if it was through effort and labor that humanity was to tend God's garden, certainly expanding this endeavor to include the whole earth also would have required substantial labor.

As we have said throughout this lesson, building God's kingdom is the goal of humanity. And creation ordinances show us two of the most basic ways God has

commanded us to work toward this goal. As a result, the church must always affirm and engage in marriage and labor. And when we do so, will we expand God's kingdom on earth, and bring him honor and glory.

Now that we have explained the cultural mandate and its relationship to the creation ordinances of marriage and labor, we are ready to turn to the various applications of the cultural mandate in the different historical periods of the kingdom of God.

Applications

As we have seen, the cultural mandate was given at creation before humanity's fall into sin. At that time, God was at peace with his people. And because there was no sin within human society, the goal of the cultural mandate was simply to expand and develop God's kingdom, especially by multiplying citizens within God's kingdom and reordering the natural world to form human societies. In this sense, the cultural mandate was originally a simple creative command rather than a redemptive or restorative command; human beings were to create more people through marriage, and to create ordered societies through labor.

But with humanity's fall into sin, human culture was corrupted, and God cursed humanity because of sin. Among other things, this corruption and curse applied specifically to marriage and to labor.

With regard to marriage, God laid the following curse on Eve in Genesis 3:16:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing ... Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you (Genesis 3:16).

Notice that Eve's curse applied both to reproduction, which would now be extremely painful for her, and to marriage, which would now involve struggles and conflicts.

God cursed Adam with these words in Genesis 3:17, 19:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food (Genesis 3:17, 19).

Prior to this curse on the ground, the ground easily yielded to humanity's labor. By this curse it became far more difficult for humanity to meet their obligation to subdue the earth and to spread God's kingdom geographically.

Humanity has continued in sin throughout history so that no human society properly manifests the kingdom of God on earth. But the cultural mandate still obligates us to marry and procreate, and to labor in order to spread God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. So, how are we to understand the cultural mandate in light of the world's corruption?

The answer is that the cultural mandate now has an expanded application. The goal of the cultural mandate is to turn the entire world into God's kingdom on earth fit for his habitation among his people. Before the Fall, this was to be accomplished simply by building new societies and cultures.

But now the task is harder. Not only do we need to subdue and fill the earth with God's faithful people, we also need to restore and redeem fallen human society by purging sin from our cultures. And in fact, the Bible makes this emphasis on restoration and redemption clear immediately after humanity's fall into sin. For example, when God cursed the serpent in the Garden of Eden, he also gave redemptive hope to the human race. Listen to his words in Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).

In the midst of dispensing curses after the Fall, God presented the *protoevangelion*, or "first gospel," indicating that he would not abandon his creation to sin and curse.

So, we see that both marriage and labor have redemptive qualities. Marriage and reproduction, as painful and conflicted as they had become, would eventually produce the Savior of the world. And labor, even though it was extremely difficult, would sustain the human race long enough to produce the coming Redeemer. And this pattern was to continue throughout history, eventually resulting in the restoration of the whole world.

For instance, in Genesis 9, after the flood of Noah's day, God repeated the command to fill the earth. And he promised to sustain the world so that the human race could subdue it once again.

And notice that as God applied the cultural mandate and creation ordinances to the world in Noah's day, it was a restorative and redemptive work. God had just destroyed the entire sinful world, and now it was up to Noah to rebuild it, to replace the destroyed sinful cultures with righteous, godly ones, and to repopulate the earth with human beings that would obey and honor the Lord.

Similarly, in Genesis 15, 17 and 22, God promised that Abraham would have innumerable descendants and that they would inherit not only the Promised Land, but eventually the whole earth.

But there was also a redemptive aspect here. Abraham was to overtake the existing pagan cultures in the Promised Land and to replace them with God's kingdom. And his descendants were eventually to spread this conquest across the whole world.

And what was true for Noah and Abraham continued to be true throughout the Bible. For instance, in Deuteronomy 28 God confirmed these same Abrahamic promises in the days of Moses. And in Psalm 89 they were confirmed again to David and his descendants.

And as we read in Revelation 11:15, Jesus will eventually rule over the entire earth, extending God's kingdom to every corner. And Hebrews 10:12-14 indicate that when Jesus does this, he will perfect both the world and the human race by destroying his enemies and completely redeeming and restoring believers.

Moreover, Ephesians 5:25-27 teach us that when Christ comes into his kingdom, he will be married to the church. And according to Hebrews 2:13, Christ will have many children because every believer is his child.

As we have seen, the cultural mandate expresses God's program for his kingdom. But since the Fall, the outworking of this program involves a long and difficult process of redemption and restoration. Nevertheless, through things like marriage and labor, God is

still using humanity to fulfill the cultural mandate. Of course, his kingdom will not be completed until Christ returns in glory. But when that day comes, the whole world will be turned into the paradise God has always intended.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the cultural mandate in mind, we are ready to see what role the Great Commission plays in God's program for his kingdom.

GREAT COMMISSION

Our discussion of the Great Commission will divide into three parts: First, we will offer a definition of the Great Commission. Second, we will explain the implications of the Great Commission. And third, we will explore the relationship between the Great Commission and the cultural mandate. Let's begin with the definition of the Great Commission.

Definition

The Great Commission is Christ's appointment of the eleven faithful apostles as his authoritative representatives and his charge to them to spread the kingdom of God throughout the whole world. This commission is commonly called "great" because it explains the overriding mission not only of the apostles but also of the church they built.

The Great Commission is recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 where we read these words from the Lord to the eleven:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

The Great Commission contains three essential elements: first, Jesus' statement that he possessed the authority to build his kingdom, and to commission the apostles to do the work; second, Jesus' charge to the apostles, instructing and authorizing them to build his kingdom; and third, Jesus' assurance that he would empower and protect the apostles in this endeavor.

Even though the Great Commission was delivered only to the apostles, the Great Commission also binds the church to continue their work. After all, Jesus commissioned the apostles to make disciples of all nations — a job clearly too big to be done by only a few men. He also spoke of being with them to the very end of the age, indicating that he would see this work through to its completion at his return. These details indicate that Jesus always intended the apostles to carry out the Great Commission by establishing a church to do the work.

Now that we have defined the Great Commission, we should turn our attention to its implications. In this section, we will consider the responsibilities the church has in light of the Great Commission.

Implications

Simply stated, the church's responsibility is to continue the kingdom program that the apostles started. These responsibilities are summarized in the second essential element of the Great Commission: the charge to the apostles. This charge is found in Matthew 28:19-20 and consists of the following instructions:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus' instruction was not just to disciple people in every nation, but to expand the kingdom of God to include the nations themselves. In other words, he was looking for a geographical expansion as well as a numerical expansion.

It is the church's job to evangelize everyone in the world, to bring believers and their families into the church, and to baptize them, and to teach them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. Throughout every generation, we must work to bring the whole world into the kingdom of God.

Having defined the Great Commission and introduced its implications for the church, we are ready to turn to our final topic: the relationship between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

Cultural Mandate

We will consider three aspects of the relationship between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission: the similarities between them, the differences between them, and the priorities we should place on each. First, let's explore the similarities between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

The similarities between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission are far reaching. For example, both obligate humanity to build God's kingdom and even to make this our primary goal in life. And as part of this kingdom building, both require us to fill the earth with citizens in God's kingdom, whether by childbirth within marriage or by evangelism. And both require us to subdue the earth, whether by building societies or by disciplining nations.

We might summarize these similarities by saying that The Great Commission is Christ's application of the cultural mandate until he returns. Since Christ's earthly ministry, the Great Commission has been and continues to be an important way to apply the cultural mandate, and the church is obligated to follow it.

In addition to these similarities, there are also some differences between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission that we should consider.

One important difference between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission is that the cultural mandate is for every age and the Great Commission focuses on the special situation of the church prior to Christ's return. The cultural mandate was given at creation, and from that time on it has always been humanity's job to turn the world into a paradise fit for God's habitation.

By contrast, the Great Commission was not given until the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, and it was specifically focused on the primary ethical responsibilities of God's people during the last period of the kingdom's history.

So, whereas the cultural mandate is our fundamental responsibility, the Great Commission is the primary application of that responsibility during the present period of history.

Another important difference is that relative to one another the cultural mandate is a broad commandment, whereas the Great Commission is a narrow commandment. The cultural mandate requires humanity to marry and bear physical children in order to produce more human beings. And it also requires us to bear spiritual children who are loyal images of God in his kingdom. By contrast, the Great Commission emphasizes only the need to bear spiritual children by making disciples.

And something similar is true of labor. Insofar as the cultural mandate aims at establishing God's kingdom throughout the world, it requires us to make disciples. But it also requires us to labor to build human societies. By contrast, the Great Commission requires us only to labor to make disciples. It does not include a specific requirement to build human societies.

Finally, having looked at the similarities and differences between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission, we should turn to the matter of priorities.

Very often in the history of the church Christians have disagreed over which of God's great mandates has priority over the other. Some have argued that Christians should concentrate their lives on the requirements of the cultural mandate by engaging in marriage, procreation, and labor as they build human culture. Others have argued that these requirements have been superseded by the gospel mandate of making disciples through evangelism and teaching. This tension has very important practical significance for each one of us. Should we concentrate in one direction or the other? Should building human culture take precedence over gospel ministry? Or should gospel ministry have priority?

In one sense, the cultural mandate has priority over the Great Commission in that it came first and expresses the ultimate goal of humanity, namely, the complete triumph of the kingdom of God throughout the entire world.

But in another sense, the Great Commission has priority in that it applies the cultural mandate to the special circumstances of the present age, focusing on what especially needs to be done in our age. While we wait for Christ to return in glory, one of our top priorities is to rescue men and women throughout the world from the power of sin through the proclamation of the gospel.

As a result, there will be times when the explicit commands of the cultural mandate and the Great Commission seem to be in tension. When we feel this tension, we should always be sure to pay special attention to the priorities of the Great Commission.

If we find tension in our lives between the cultural mandate's commands of marriage and labor and the Great Commission's commands to evangelize and disciple, we need to evaluate the cultural mandate in light of the Great Commission. We need to understand that the Great Commission's statements are normative interpretations and applications of the cultural mandate for our time. And in this sense, we need to give some priority to the Great Commission when it comes to modern application.

In 1 Corinthians 9:15-23 Paul spoke of giving up his right to marry and to be paid for his labor. Listen to his words there:

I have not used any of these rights... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:15-23).

In conclusion, the cultural mandate is God's overarching program for his kingdom. His ultimate goal is to spread his kingdom throughout all of creation and to populate his kingdom with faithful citizens. And he has established creation ordinances such as marriage and labor as a means to accomplishing this goal.

But humanity's fall into sin has made this goal impossible for us to fulfill. Therefore, God has begun to redeem the human race in order that we might restore the world and turn it into his perfect kingdom. And the primary means he has provided for this redemption and restoration are evangelism and discipleship, those things he has commanded in the Great Commission.

The Great Commission, then, is a normative application of the cultural mandate for this present age in which the final stages of the kingdom of God have already begun, but have not yet come to completion.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have seen that the kingdom of God is the ultimate goal of Christian ethics. We have considered the circumstances of the kingdom of God, including its importance, its components and its development. We have discussed our experience of the kingdom of God, looking at our twofold chief end. And we have seen the program for the kingdom as it is stated both in the cultural mandate and Great Commission.

The success of the kingdom is God's ultimate goal for his creation. And therefore, it should be our ultimate goal too. In fact, every one of our thoughts, words and deeds must serve the building of God's kingdom in some way. Insofar as they do, God approves and blesses them, so that they can rightly be called ethically good. And insofar as they detract from the goal of the kingdom, God condemns them so that they are rightly called evil. Whenever we set out to make ethical judgments, we must account for the ways our decisions will impact the kingdom of God.

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
SEVEN

THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
UNDERSTANDING THE FACTS



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Seven

The Situational Perspective: Understanding the Facts

INTRODUCTION

One of the most famous detectives in English literature is Sherlock Holmes. The fictitious Sherlock Holmes was supposed to be a very clever consultant who helped the police solve difficult cases. And Holmes' brilliance in solving cases was said to be twofold. On the one hand, he had great powers of observation so that he could discover all the relevant factual details of a case. And on the other hand, he was incredibly logical so that he could understand how these facts related to the crime he was trying to solve. Well, in some ways, making biblical decisions requires Christians to be like Sherlock Holmes. We have to identify many factual details. And we also have to figure out how all these facts relate to the ethical questions we are trying to answer.

This is the seventh lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it "The Situational Perspective: Understanding the Facts." Our goal in this lesson is to identify the major components of the ethical situations we encounter in the modern world, and to explain how each component bears on the ethical decisions we must make.

Throughout these lessons, our model for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. This outlook on ethics has reminded us that there are three major perspectives to be taken on every ethical issue: a focus on God's word which we have called the normative perspective; a focus on the person which we have called the existential perspective; and a focus on the situation which we have called the situational perspective. For some lessons now, we have been concentrating on various aspects of the situational perspective, and we will look further into this dimension of Christian ethics in this lesson as well.

You will recall that in earlier lessons we identified the most basic elements of our ethical situation as facts. These facts include everything that exists. In addition to this, we identified two special kinds of facts that are particularly important in ethics. First, we spoke of our goals, which are the intended or potential outcomes of our thoughts, words, and deeds. And second, we talked about means, which are the ways we reach our goals.

In this lesson, we will look in more detail at the broad category of facts in general. In particular, we will explore the importance of considering facts about God, the world around us, and human beings when we make ethical decisions.

Our lesson will divide into three parts. We will begin by identifying the fact of God himself, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Next, we will describe the facts of creation in general, looking at the various realms of nature. And finally, we will consider humanity as a critical element of our ethical situation. Let's turn first to God as the first and foremost fact in our ethical situation.

GOD

We speak of God as the ultimate fact in our situation because he is the one who gives existence and meaning to every other fact. Other facts exist only because God has created them and continues to sustain them. And they have meaning only because God authoritatively assigns meaning to them within his creation. And this means that we must always interpret every fact in light of God's existence and character. So, when we stop to consider the ethical importance of facts, it is important to begin with God.

Our discussion of God as the ultimate fact in Christian ethics will focus on three familiar aspects of God's character: his authority, which includes his right to rule over all creation; his control, which is his power and governance over all creation; and his presence, his existence and manifestation within creation. We will begin by looking at God's authority, or right to rule, over all creation.

AUTHORITY

From cover to cover the Scriptures make it clear that God has authority, the right to rule, over all of creation. This right to rule derives from the fact that God is the creator and sustainer of all creation. There is no remnant of creation that God does not bring into existence or that does not depend on him for its continued existence. God's authority as the creator has at least three basic attributes that we should always remember in Christian ethics: First, his authority is absolute. Second, it is exclusive. And third, it is exhaustive. Let's take a closer look at these ideas, starting with the absolute nature of God's authority as creator.

Absolute

God's authority is absolute in the sense that God has complete and total freedom over what he has created. Scripture often illustrates God's absolute authority by comparing it with the authority that a potter has over his clay. We find this motif in places like Isaiah 29:16, Isaiah 45:9, Jeremiah 18:1-10, and Romans 9:18-24. Listen to the way Paul spoke of God's authority in Romans 9:20-21:

Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:20-21).

Paul's rhetorical questions teach us that because God is the creator of all, he has the freedom and right to do whatever he wants with what he creates.

And what is true of God's absolute authority over people is also true of his authority over the rest of creation. God may do whatever he pleases with everything he

has made. He has the freedom and the right to act upon it as he sees fit, to require of it whatever he desires, and to judge it according to his own standards.

So, when God reveals his ethical judgments, they are true and never subject to scrutiny. In general terms, Christians usually accept the idea that God has the right to command them to determine their ethical judgments. But all too often, we refuse to accept God's ethical judgments unless they are confirmed by some other standard, and we look for excuses to avoid submitting to what he has clearly stated. But as we have seen, God's authority in ethics is absolute. His moral judgments, his outlook on good and evil, must be accepted as true simply because he has said so.

Exclusive

Second, besides having absolute authority, God also has exclusive authority over everything he has created.

When we say that God's authority as creator is exclusive, we mean that only God possesses absolute authority. Absolute authority belongs only to the creator, and God is the only creator. Therefore, God alone holds this ultimate authority. Other authorities exist, such as spirits, angels, and earthly rulers. And even individuals have a measure of authority over their own lives. But all these types of authority are delegated by God so that God's authority is always superior to creaturely authority. And as a result, every lesser authority can be overruled by the greater authority of the creator. This means that God's moral judgments are beyond legitimate questioning. And it is why the Bible insists that our ethical decisions be made in ultimate submission to God.

Exhaustive

Third, in addition to having absolute and exclusive authority, God also has exhaustive authority over the universe.

When we say that God's authority is exhaustive, we mean that it extends over everything he has created in every detail. And there are at least two important implications of this fact. First, all creatures are under God's authority. In other words, despite the fact that many human beings rebel against God and refuse to submit to his commands, his moral judgments apply to them. No matter where we live or who we are, and no matter what our culture or religion, all human beings are accountable to God. And second, because God has created all things, there is not one aspect of creation that is morally neutral. He has created everything for a purpose and assigned it a moral character. Everything in creation either functions as God wants it to and is therefore good, or is out of accord with his will and is therefore evil. The whole creation, down to its last detail, is subject to him. So, as we seek to serve God, we must always consider and submit to his authority.

Having explored God's authority, we should turn our attention to a second fact about God: his control over all creation — his powerful governing of everything that exists.

CONTROL

From the outset, we need to recognize that different branches of the Christian church understand God's control over his creation in different ways. But Christians agree to a large extent, because the Scriptures are very clear about certain aspects of God's control.

We will limit our discussion to two basic issues related to God's control over creation. First, we will speak of the sovereign character of God's control. And second, we will highlight the moral character of his control. Consider first the sovereign nature of God's control over creation.

Sovereign

Throughout the centuries, Christians have consistently affirmed God's sovereign control over creation. Of course, theologians and denominations have differed on some matters. But broadly speaking, Christians have always affirmed the biblical teaching that God has an unlimited ability and an unlimited right to control the creation in any way he sees fit. Furthermore, because he is a good and responsible king over his creation, he exercises his power and right for the benefit of his kingdom.

Unfortunately, in a variety of ways, both Christians and non-Christians have sometimes argued that God's sovereign control over his creation is incompatible with the idea of human moral responsibility. They have wrongly believed that both these ideas cannot be true. Either God is sovereign, or we are responsible — but not both. In recent years, this outlook has been expressed in a movement known as open theism. Open theism teaches that in order for God to hold human beings responsible for our ethical decisions and behavior, human beings must have ultimate control over our lives. It insists that if God has sovereign control over the universe, then he has no right to hold us responsible for what we do.

So, in order to preserve human ethical responsibility, open theism teaches that God has either limited his sovereignty voluntarily, or is by his very nature unable to control the entire creation. It concludes that God does not know what will happen, that he has only limited influence over things that happen in creation, and that he is often frustrated by the way that history unfolds. In short, open theism denies God's sovereign control in order to affirm human responsibility.

Now, historically, Christian theology has always taught that God's sovereign control is completely compatible with human responsibility. In fact, rather than seeing God's control as precluding human responsibility, Christian theology has followed the Scriptures by insisting that human beings are morally responsible to God precisely because God has sovereign control over creation. Let's unpack what we mean.

On the one side, many biblical passages teach that God has an all-encompassing plan for his creation and that he controls creation in order to carry out this plan. For instance, the Bible sometimes speaks of his unchanging purpose, as in Hebrews 6:17, or of the choices and plans he made before the foundation of the world, as in Matthew 13:35 and Ephesians 1:4. At other times, it refers to the plan by which he controls all creation,

as in Romans 8:28. It even speaks of his appointment of people and events, such as in Acts 4:28 and Romans 8:29.

Now, Christians have qualified God's control of the universe by relating it in various ways to things like his foreknowledge, his active and passive will, and his positive and permissive decrees. But in the final analysis, historical Christianity has always affirmed that because God is the Creator, he can and does exercise sovereign control over his creation.

On the other side, rather than seeing God's sovereign control as somehow contrary to ethical responsibility, Christianity has seen God's sovereign control as the basis for ethical responsibility. Listen to the way Paul stated the relationship between God's sovereign control and our responsibility in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Notice here that the Philippian Christians were to live morally and reverently because God was at work in their lives, causing them to will and to act according to his sovereign plan. In this way, his sovereign control of their lives was the basis of their moral responsibility. Rather than seeing divine sovereignty and human responsibility as mutually exclusive, Paul understood God's sovereignty to be the foundation for human responsibility.

Now that we have spoken of the sovereign character of God's control over creation, we are ready to speak about the moral character of his control — looking at the ways God has designed creation to be conducive to morality.

Moral

One very important principle in Christian ethics is that God does not force human beings into moral situations where there is no escape. Scripture teaches us that no matter how complex moral dilemmas appear, God always provides the means and the opportunity to avoid sin. This general principle is laid out in 1 Corinthians 10:13 where Paul wrote these words:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In its original context, this verse referred to the temptation to commit idolatry that the Corinthian church was undergoing. But the general principle is true as well: God does not allow us to be presented with situations in which all our options are sinful. He always orchestrates circumstances in such a way that we have a way out, a solution that is praiseworthy and not sinful.

Of course, sometimes this way of escape is not easily apparent. Most of us know from experience that some moral dilemmas are extremely difficult to solve. And to take advantage of the way out, we might first have to change ourselves in significant ways. But we can be sure that the opportunity for these types of changes is always there.

This is what we mean when we say that God's control is moral. He orders the creation so that the circumstances of our lives never excuse our unethical choices. He governs the entire universe so that there is always a way of escape from the temptation of sin.

Having considered God's authority and control as fundamental facts in our situation, we are ready to turn to a third aspect of God's character: his presence among us as he involves himself in the world.

PRESENCE

Our discussion of God's presence within creation will divide into three sections: First, we will speak of God as the covenant king. Second, we will speak of him as the incarnate Lord. Third, we will speak of him as ministering Spirit. Let's move first to God's role as covenant king over creation, and particularly over humanity.

Covenant King

God has been present with humanity as our covenant king ever since he created Adam and Eve. As we saw in a prior lesson, our first parents were created as God's images, his vassal kings whose job it was to spread God's kingdom throughout the earth. And God was manifestly present to bless them when they were faithful and to curse them when they sinned.

With the Fall of mankind into sin, God no longer walked with Adam and Even in the cool of the Garden. Nevertheless, God did not leave his creation; he remained present with the human race as our covenant king.

Of course, God has always been invisibly omnipresent. But he also appeared in many visible manifestations, such as the pillar of fire and cloud that we read about in Exodus 13. Besides this, he made his presence known through miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. He also was present in special ways with certain people, such as Elijah who called down fire from heaven in 2 Kings 1. God was frequently present as Israel's covenant king, offering protection and blessings to his people, and cursing and destroying their enemies. And God is still our king today, as Jesus taught in Matthew 5:34-35.

God's presence with us as our covenant king means that he is here to enforce his judgments over all the earth and its inhabitants. As Hebrews 4:13 puts it:

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13).

God sees everything because God is present everywhere. And he judges us on the basis of what he sees. You may recall that in earlier lessons we have defined Christian ethics as:

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

Our ethical decisions must always account for God's presence with us as judge, both now and in the future. And therefore, his presence with us as royal judge is always a critical fact to consider as we make ethical decisions. We do not live apart from God; we live in his presence under his judgment and blessing.

With God's role as covenant king in mind, we are ready to turn to God's presence with us as incarnate Lord in the person of Jesus Christ.

Incarnate Lord

When Jesus was born to Mary in Bethlehem, God became present with us in a new way. Perhaps the most obvious difference was that he was physically present and walked freely among society as one of us. Although we could list many, many ethical results of his incarnation, we will limit our discussion to four matters.

First, Hebrews 2:17 teaches that forgiveness of sins results from Jesus' human nature and physical presence on earth, particularly through his death on the cross. And this forgiveness makes it possible for God to bless us for our good works.

Second, it was through his earthly human life that Jesus gained firsthand sympathy for us in the midst of the temptations we face. Listen to the words of Hebrews 2:18:

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

By mediating before the Father in heaven, Jesus ensures that our works are judged mercifully, not harshly. And he motivates the Father to extend his grace toward us, strengthening us to resist sin and applying forgiveness to us on a daily basis.

Third, Jesus' earthly presence with us provides us with the supreme pattern of righteousness for all human life. Scripture records many details from Christ's life, and each one of them presents to us the picture of perfectly ethical behavior, thoughts, emotions, and judgment. And God is now conforming us to Christ's image, not only providing a model for us to imitate but also empowering us to be like him.

And fourth, our moral victory is ensured by Jesus' presence. Jesus' earthly ministry began the full restoration of the kingdom of God. By defeating his enemies and ours on the cross, Jesus enabled us to prevail in moral battles, and he ensured our ultimate victory.

We cannot be in Christ's human presence on earth right now. But his past presence on earth was critical for illustrating ethical behavior, and even for making

ethical behavior possible. And his continuing physical presence in heaven is an integral part of our ongoing ethical standing before God.

Now that we have spoken about God as our covenant king and incarnate Lord, we should turn to God's presence as our ministering Spirit, which is the most direct presence of God that we commonly encounter in the present age.

Ministering Spirit

When Jesus ascended into heaven he poured forth his Spirit on the church. The Holy Spirit ministers to us in numerous ways, but we will limit ourselves to two of his primary ministries among us. First, the Holy Spirit indwells individual believers, enabling and motivating us to make ethical decisions.

In Romans 8:9-10, the apostle Paul wrote these words about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

You ... are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness (Romans 8:9-10).

Paul said the Holy Spirit does at least two things that are central to Christian ethics: first, he gives us spiritual life, and second, he controls us. Let's consider each of these ideas in more detail.

Because of humanity's fall into sin, all human beings are born into a state of spiritual death. This makes us morally impotent; we have no ability to do anything that God ultimately considers to be good. But when the Holy Spirit gives us new life, he also gives us moral ability so that we can do good works. And this means that we can and should rely on the Holy Spirit to help us resist sin.

But the Holy Spirit changes our hearts and minds so that we love God and desire his blessings. In short, he gives us the desire to live ethically. And correspondingly, we have a moral obligation to submit to his control over our lives and to pursue our godly desires in place of our sinful desires.

Besides indwelling us, the Holy Spirit also ministers by gifting believers with supernatural abilities to perform works of service for the church. The Holy Spirit has gifted believers in various ways throughout history. Though the Spirit indwelled all believers even in the Old Testament, he gave spiritual gifting only to special individuals, such as prophets, priests and kings. But the Old Testament also looked forward to a day when the Spirit would be poured out on all of God's people. Listen to Peter's words in Acts 2:16-17:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:16-17).

Joel had prophesied of a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all believers, extending spiritual gifting to everyone he indwelt. And Peter taught that this came to pass at Pentecost. From that day forward, every believer in the church has been spiritually gifted.

From passages such as 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, as well as from church history, we know that some spiritual gifts are fairly common — things like serving, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, encouraging, contributing, and administration. The more spectacular gifts such as visions, miracles and tongues are less common. But regardless of which spiritual gifts we have, the point we want to make is this: the Holy Spirit bestows gifts in order to build up the church. So, whatever gifts we possess, our moral duty is to use them for the good of God's people. Listen to Paul's teaching on this matter in 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11:

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... All these [gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11).

One of the clear ethical implications of living in the presence of the Holy Spirit is that we are obligated to identify and use the gifts that God has given us.

Some of the most fundamental facts that we must consider in any ethical situation pertain to God himself: his absolute, exclusive, exhaustive authority; his sovereign and moral control over creation; and his presence with us as covenant king, incarnate Lord, and ministering Spirit. When we ground ourselves in a proper understanding of who God is, we are much better prepared to make decisions that please him, and bring his blessings to us.

Having identified the facts related to God himself, we are ready to turn to the facts that make up creation in general, including both its physical and its spiritual aspects.

CREATION

Traditional systematic theology has spoken of everything that exists as primarily inhabiting one of three basic realms. First, there is the supernatural realm, that realm that is above nature. Although we often use this term to refer to anything that is not part of our natural world, it has a more technical use in systematic theology. Specifically, it refers to God and his works, since only God himself is truly higher, more powerful, and more authoritative than the natural world.

Second, there is the natural realm. This is the world God created in Genesis 1, the world in which we live and operate. And without a doubt, it is the side of creation that is most familiar to human beings.

And third, there is the preternatural realm, that realm that is beyond nature. It is not above nature in the way that God is, but is rather beside nature as a distinct aspect of creation. This is the realm inhabited by invisible spirits such as angels and demons.

In line with this traditional understanding, our discussion of the facts of creation will divide into two parts. First, we will look at the preternatural aspects of creation, considering how the spiritual realm inhabited by angels and demons relates to Christian ethics. And second, we will address the natural world and its relationship to ethics. Let's begin with the preternatural, invisible aspects of creation.

PRETERNATURAL

Unfortunately, modern Christians, especially in western cultures, often pay little attention to the invisible angels and demons that surround and interact with us. And this should not be surprising. After all, our human experience is typically limited to the natural world. We constantly interact with other people as well as with our physical environment, and we normally try to explain most of the world and events around us as natural phenomena. So, we rarely place much emphasis on the preternatural world. But the fact is that angels and demons have a significant impact on the things that happen in our lives. And as a result, the preternatural world is an important consideration when it comes to making ethical decisions.

We will consider the preternatural aspects of creation under two separate headings related to Christian ethics. First, we will describe the inhabitants of the preternatural realm and their relationship to the natural world. And second, we will turn to the topic of spiritual warfare, the cosmic struggle between good and evil that rages all around us. Let's turn first to the inhabitants of the preternatural realm, namely, the angels and the demons.

Inhabitants

Modern science speaks of humanity as largely alone in the universe of rational creatures. We all realize that we live on a relatively small planet circling a relatively small sun in a vast galaxy that is only a tiny part of the universe.

But Scripture teaches that God has also populated the universe with a vast number of spiritual persons known as angels and demons. Both angels and demons are intelligent, rational beings that have wills and personalities.

When God created these beings, they were all angels — pure and perfect, serving God in his heavenly kingdom. But some of these angels willfully rebelled against God, and fell from this blessed state into condemnation. The Bible commonly uses the term angels to refer to those blessed angels who remained loyal to God, and often refers to the fallen, rebellious angels as demons. Both angels and demons have influence over many things that happen in the natural world.

We will look at the impact that both angels and demons have in our ethical environment. Let's begin with the topic of angels before addressing the subject of demons.

Angels serve as God's loyal messengers and agents. They communicate his word to human beings, and they interact with humanity on God's behalf. Sometimes these are dramatic events. For example, in 2 Kings 19:35 we learn that the angel of the Lord slew one hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrian troops in one night in order to halt Sennacherib's invasion of Judah. But at other times angels work in more mundane ways. For instance, Psalm 91:11-12 teaches that angels also work to prevent God's faithful followers from stubbing their toes.

Hebrews 1:14 summarizes the important work of the angels by asking this rhetorical question:

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14).

And the answer, of course, is "yes." But what does this ministry have to do with our ethical decisions?

For one thing, God's angels are constantly working to ensure that we always have an opportunity to behave morally. Their service should make us more confident of God's care and provision. And this confidence should encourage us to make ethical decisions even when these decisions create difficulties for us.

Beyond this, God is actually using our salvation to teach wisdom to his angels in heaven. Angels need no salvation, and salvation is not available to demons. As a result, salvation is mysterious to them. So, by observing God's salvation of humanity, they learn more about the Lord's glory and are better able to praise him.

The New Testament speaks about this in many places, including in Ephesians 3:10 where Paul wrote these words:

[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3:10).

As we repent of sin and are blessed by God, the angels learn more about the Lord's ways and render him greater praise. So, one important factor to consider in our ethical decisions is the ways our decisions lead angels to praise and honor God.

With this understanding of angels in mind, we should turn our attention to demons and to the role they play as facts in our situation.

Like angels, demons are able to interact with the natural realm, which they do in order to harm us. In the New Testament, the most commonly mentioned way demons attack Christians is by tempting them into idolatry.

Scripture also indicates that demons can harm us in other ways, as well. For instance, in Job 1-2 we find that Satan, the chief of demons, was permitted to destroy Job's possessions and health, and to kill his family. Now, as we learn in these chapters, this was an unusual circumstance in which God permitted Satan to have so much

influence in Job's life. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the kinds of things that demons can do in the natural realm.

As we will see in the next section, the activities of demons have many implications for our lives. They constantly tempt us, trying to lead us away from moral choices. And for this reason, we must always remember that they are an important fact in our situation.

Now, there are countless moral implications that we might draw from the activities of the inhabitants of the preternatural realm. But for our purposes, we will focus on the spiritual warfare that goes on between them and how it affects our lives in the natural realm.

Spiritual Warfare

Ever since Satan and the rest of the demons rebelled against God, they have been locked in battle against God's holy angels. Because this conflict is fought between good and evil spirits, namely angels and demons, we often speak of it as spiritual warfare. This warfare is mentioned frequently in Scripture, but perhaps the best known passage is Paul's teaching on the armor of God in Ephesians 6. Listen to Paul's words from Ephesians 6:12:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

Here Paul indicated that our enemies include the demonic rulers, authorities, powers and forces in the preternatural world. This spiritual warfare is a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Moreover, it influences us in ethical ways as angels help us find ways to obey God and demons tempt us to sin.

The good news is that Jesus has crippled the demons' ability to overtake us. Through his death and resurrection, he has already conquered all of his enemies. Paul taught this fact in Colossians 2:15, writing these encouraging words:

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

But even though Christ has won the war, the demons still persist in skirmishes against us. And they will continue to attack us until God judges them on the last day. For this reason, we must be vigilant soldiers, dressed for battle in the armor of God, relying on the Lord's grace for strength to stand against the demonic hordes. We must never forget that this spiritual warfare is a real and powerful element in our ethical situation.

With this understanding of the preternatural world in mind, we are ready to address the ethical implications of the natural, material world in which we live.

NATURAL

The details of the natural world are nearly limitless, so we will focus our attention on the natural world as a whole. First, we will speak of the place of the natural world in its original condition at creation. Second, we will look at the ways that humanity's fall into sin has impacted the natural world. And third, we will discuss the implications that humanity's redemption from sin has for the natural world. Let's begin with the topic of creation, and with the role that the natural world plays within it.

Creation

In Genesis 1, Moses described the creation of the entire natural realm in a way that emphasized the central importance of humanity upon the earth. From his account, we can see that human beings are part of nature. According to Genesis 2:7, God created us from the dust of the ground. And because we are part of nature, we have an ethical obligation to protect it.

Moses also made it clear that human beings are lords or rulers over nature. God did not create us to be equals with the plants and animals, but to rule over them. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:28:

God blessed [humanity] and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

From the very beginning, God has called human beings to govern the world — to administer it in a way that promotes life and growth, turning the world into a kingdom that is fit for him to inhabit.

Now that we have looked at the original state of the natural realm at creation, let's turn our attention to humanity's fall into sin, and particularly to the impact it had on the natural world.

Fall

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God responded by cursing both the human race and the earth, subjecting them to corruption. This caused the earth to oppose the lordship of humanity in many ways. For instance, it became difficult for human beings to work the land to make it produce food. We read about this in Genesis 3:17-19, where God laid the following curse on Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for

you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food (Genesis 3:17-19).

As a result of this curse, the natural world is affected by sin in many ways. We might summarize the situation of the natural realm in this way: nature is both the recipient of God's cursing and the instrument of God's cursing. That is to say, nature is both corrupted by sin and is often hostile toward us. These are important details of our natural situation to take into account in ethics. Nature is not as it was originally designed to be; it often complicates our ethical decisions because it is corrupted by sin, and it often serves as God's instrument of discipline for us.

At the same time, the natural world has not been completely corrupted by the Fall. The earth still belongs to God, and so does everything in it. It still proclaims his goodness and majesty, and God still uses it to provide us with many good things. As we read in Psalm 19:1:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Psalm 19:1).

And as Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:4-5:

Everything [that] 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).

Nature is still good. It is still God's creation, and it is still a means God uses to minister to us and to bless us. So, when we face ethical questions, we must always remember that both the corruption and the blessings of nature continue to be important features of our situation.

Having spoken about nature with regard to both creation and the fall into sin, we are ready to turn to the topic of redemption and to the role that the natural realm plays in redemptive history.

Redemption

When humanity fell into sin, the natural realm became both an instrument of cursing and a recipient of cursing. But in redemption, both of these effects are reversed. The natural realm becomes an instrument of redemption, as God works within the natural realm to accomplish redemption for human beings. And it also becomes a recipient of redemption, as God purges corruption from the natural world through the redemption of humanity.

Nature functions as a means of redemption in a number of ways. For one thing, God uses things in the natural realm as tools in the redemptive process. Events in the natural world testify to God's greatness. They present opportunities for us to believe in him for salvation. And they place us in circumstances that lead to our spiritual growth and victory. For another, God sometimes overrides the normal, natural order in

miraculous ways, changing nature so that it presents us with signs and wonders that build our faith. Consider Romans 8:28 where Paul wrote these words:

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

By the term “all things,” Paul meant every circumstance, every event, every creature, every object, every thought — everything. And that includes everything that exists or happens in the natural world. God is controlling all of it to our benefit, furthering our redemption.

So, when we are faced with ethical choices, we need to ask questions like, what is God teaching me through my experiences of the natural world? How can my interactions with the natural world help me to become more like Christ? And how can I use the natural world to bring glory to God?

Beyond this, the natural realm itself will ultimately be a recipient of redemption. God will refine both heaven and the earth to create a new heaven and new earth. Scripture mentions this new creation in many places, such as Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1. Passages like these indicate that the corruption of the natural world will last until humanity’s redemption is completed at Christ’s return. At that point, the earth will be brought to the glorious destiny that God ordained for it from the beginning. Paul wrote about this in Romans 8:19, 21, where we find these words:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed... The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:19, 21).

The fact that God is redeeming the natural world indicates that he places great value on it. So, as we make ethical decisions, we also need to consider how our choices will impact the natural creation. And that means that we have to ask questions like: What effect will my decisions have on the natural world? How can I increase and improve humanity’s dominion over the earth? And how can I promote a world fit for God’s glorious presence? Whenever we approach an ethical question, we have to take account of the ways that the creation influences us. And we have to remember how our actions impact the creation as well.

Now that we have identified the basic facts pertaining to God himself, as well as the facts of creation in general, we are ready to consider the facts related to humanity, the pinnacle of God’s creation.

HUMANITY

We will address the facts related to humanity in two ways. First, we will consider humanity in the context of society, looking at the facts related to our attempts to live with

others. And second, we will speak of human beings as individuals, focusing on our attempts to live with ourselves. Let's turn our attention at this point to human society as an important feature of our situation.

SOCIETY

We will look at three aspects of society that relate to our study of Christian ethics. First, we will consider the corporate solidarity of human society, the way that God views the human race as a unified group. Second, we will speak briefly of the commonality of our human experiences. And third, we will mention human community. Let's look first at the solidarity of human society as we stand before God.

Solidarity

In our discussion of humanity's corporate solidarity, we will speak of the cultural mandate as a corporate task that was given to humanity at creation. And we will speak of the Fall as a corporate failure for the human race that resulted in corporate consequences. Finally, we will look at redemption as the corporate reconstitution of human society. Let's think first about humanity's corporate task within creation, namely the cultural mandate.

In a prior lesson, we spoke of the cultural mandate as God's command that human beings expand his kingdom to the ends of the earth through the development of human culture. This mandate was given directly to Adam and Eve when they were created. Listen to God's words to our first parents in Genesis 1:28:

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it
(Genesis 1:28).**

Of course, God never intended Adam to father and Eve to bear enough children to fill the entire planet with people and cultures. Rather, he intended them to be the first of many generations of human beings. And he intended that the human race would corporately fulfill this mandate.

As a result, all human beings have solidarity with each other. That is to say, God has assigned this task of filling and subduing the earth to the human race as a whole as a singular corporate entity. But God has not assigned every aspect of the cultural mandate to every individual. The cultural mandate obligates humanity as a whole to reproduce and to build cultures. And the moral obligation of the individual is merely to do his or her part, to cooperate with all of humanity in accomplishing this corporate task.

This corporate solidarity of the human race in the cultural mandate teaches us something very important about ethics. It teaches us that from the very beginning, God has intended human beings to take other people into account when we make individual decisions. We have to consider how our decisions will affect them, as well as how we can

work together to accomplish our corporate task of expanding God's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

With the corporate task of humanity in mind, let's address the topic of our corporate failure when the human race fell into sin.

When God created Adam and Eve, he assigned them the corporate task of the cultural mandate. But he also assigned them individual roles that contributed to the success of that task. Then, in the Fall, Adam and Eve each violated their assigned individual roles, and in the process they violated the corporate task they had been given. In this way, the Fall involved not only the sins of Adam and Eve as individuals but also the breakdown of their relationship, their God-ordained family structure. And so the human race was united in its rebellion against God.

The fact that the Fall was a corporate failure has far reaching implications for Christian ethics. It means that we have an obligation not only to be ethically pure as individuals, but also to promote the morality of other individuals. It shows that we are required to form families and societies, and to establish ethical practices within those relationships. And it teaches us that we need to be wary of the temptations that come to us through those relationships.

Now that we have considered the corporate task of humanity and our corporate failure in that task, we should turn our attention to the corporate consequences of humanity's fall into sin.

In order to understand the corporate consequences of the Fall, it helps to remember that when God created Adam and Eve, he entered into a covenant with them. Among other things, this covenant required Adam and Eve to obey God, and it defined the consequences of their obedience or disobedience. But this covenant did not just govern God's relationship with Adam and Eve as individuals. Rather, it governed Adam and Eve collectively. In fact, Scripture teaches that every human being who has ever existed or ever will exist was included in this covenant.

So, when Adam and Eve violated God's covenant by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the consequences for their disobedience fell not only on them, but also on their posterity. Because of the corporate solidarity of the human race, this one transgression condemned every individual of the human race to the covenant curses. As Paul summarized it in Romans 5:18:

The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men (Romans 5:18).

The only exception to this was Jesus, who did not descend from Adam and Eve after the manner of normal human reproduction, but was conceived in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit. Every other human being fell under the covenant curses when Adam sinned.

As a consequence of the Fall, the rest of us are born under God's curse of death, and destined to eternal judgment. And in addition to being born guilty and condemned, we are also born corrupt, indwelt and enslaved by sin and incapable of doing anything good. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:7-8:

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Romans 8:7-8).

In fact, the consequences of the Fall are so severe that apart from God's work of redemption, there is no way for us to think, say, or do anything that is truly ethical.

Because we are so corrupted by sin, we always have to question our moral instincts and intuitions. We cannot simply follow our hearts, imagining that they will always lead us into ethical purity.

One consequence of this universal problem of sin is that the human race does not fulfill the cultural mandate in the way God intended. We build and expand human civilization throughout the world, but indwelling sin commonly causes us to build in a way that fails to honor and glorify God.

We are supposed to help one another in the task of building God's kingdom on earth, but the corruption of sin turns us into hindrances. So consequently, as we seek to bring glory to God, we not only have to work positively to build his kingdom, but we have to maintain a vigilant watch for sin. We have to test and prove our own motives and behaviors as well as those of the people around us.

Having considered humanity's corporate task and corporate failure, as well as the corporate consequences of that failure, let's turn to the corporate reconstitution of our human social structures.

In the modern world, it is common for Christians to focus on the individual aspects of salvation — things like forgiveness of sin, and eternal life for individual people. But as we have seen in prior lessons, God's plan for creation is not simply to save a host of individual believers. Rather, it is to build a kingdom; it is to build a new social structure and a new society inhabited by renewed people. Listen to 1 Peter 2:9 where Peter described the church in corporate terms:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).

God is not simply redeeming individuals. Rather, he is redeeming a people, a priesthood, a nation. That is to say, he is redeeming individuals and placing them in redeemed societies.

We are all aware that Jesus is our king, and that we are his kingdom. And we all recognize that he has ordained social and authority structures for his people even today, such as families and church offices. And when Jesus returns in the future, corporate social structures will be completely redeemed as well. And these facts are important to the ethical decisions we make. We need to focus not only on our personal redemption but also on the maintenance of godly social structures, such as families, church congregations, even nations, which are all part of the great kingdom that God is building on earth.

Now that we have explained the corporate solidarity of the human race in our dealings with God, we should consider the facts related to the commonality of our human experiences.

Commonality

Within the human race, we are divided into many smaller groups of people. We are members of nations, cultures, sub-cultures, churches, families and so on. Our histories are not simply biographies of individuals but accounts about nations and people groups. We exist and govern ourselves in social structures such as families and countries. And we have shared cultures that bind us together with clothing styles, food, music, art, architecture, and many other things. Within each of these social groups, there are fundamental similarities that bind the group together. These similarities and differences have to be taken into consideration when we make ethical decisions.

A concise summary of this idea can be found in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22, where Paul wrote these words:

To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) ... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law)... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).

Paul taught that it is important for us to adapt our behavior to the shared experiences of the people around us. He took into consideration the human social contexts in which he found himself, and he changed his behavior in the light of what he saw. For instance, he followed Jewish traditions in Jewish settings, and Gentile practices in Gentile settings. Of course, he made sure not to violate anything that the Scriptures taught. But to the extent that he was able, he conformed his application of God's law to the shared experiences of those around him. And following his example, we must do the same.

Having spoken of the corporate solidarity of the human race before God, and of the importance of commonality in our human experiences, we are ready to consider the subject of community, the facts related to our normal interactions with each other, whether as members of the human race, or of a smaller group, or as individuals.

Community

We will divide the topic of community into two parts. First, we will consider the impact that human beings have on each other. And second, we will address the responsibilities we bear toward each other. Let's begin with the impact that individuals have on others within their community.

There can be no doubt that the decisions and actions of individuals often impact the people around them. When these decisions and actions conform to the teachings of Scripture, they impact others in ways that glorify God. When they are not, they impact others in ways that promote sin. We impact others in our community in innumerable

ways. But for the sake of this lesson, we will focus our discussion on the impact that believers have on each other in the church.

In 1 Corinthians 12:26-27 Paul described the impact that Christians have on each other by using the metaphor of the human body. Listen to what he wrote there:

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:26-27).

In this passage, Paul taught that Christians must treat one another with honor and respect, because what happens to one Christian affects every believer in the world. In this sense the impact that we have on each other is very broad, so that we must always take the whole church into consideration each time we make decisions. To the extent that we are able to determine the impact our actions will have on other believers, we must make decisions that benefit them and do not hurt them, and that promote them to behave in ethical ways.

Paul gave a very concrete example of this in 1 Corinthians 8 where he gave instructions regarding food that had been sacrificed to idols. In general, he taught that it was acceptable for Christians to eat this food. But he qualified this by saying that if eating this food caused other believers to fall into the sin of idolatry, then Christians should abstain from these foods. Listen to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:13:

If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall (1 Corinthians 8:13).

In order for our decisions to be biblical, we must consider the impact our actions have on others.

Knowing the importance of the impact we have on each other, we should turn our attention to the related topic of the responsibilities we bear toward one another. As we did when discussing the impact we have on others, we will focus particularly on the responsibilities that we bear toward each other in the church.

Scripture teaches us about our responsibilities toward each other in many places. So, for the sake of illustration, we will focus on the Lord's command that we love one another. This command is mentioned frequently in Scripture, but let's look at the way that John spoke about it in his first epistle. Listen to the words of 1 John 3:11-18:

We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:11-18).

John indicated that we have a responsibility to love one another in the same way that Jesus loved us. And this responsibility encompasses all of life. It demands our time, our

money, our possessions, even our lives. And this is a responsibility that must be reflected in all our ethical decisions.

Now that we have addressed the facts related to living with others in human society, we are ready to turn our attention to ourselves as individuals.

INDIVIDUALS

As we have seen, human beings have many things in common. We are all responsible to the same God. We live in the same natural world and are influenced by the same preternatural forces. And we live in societies with many others who are like us. But there are also many important ways in which every person is unique. We all have different personalities, different histories, different abilities, and so on. And these individual differences are important facts to consider when we are faced with ethical choices.

We will speak of four types of facts related to human beings as individuals. First, we will speak of personal character. Second, we will mention the significance of the experiences of each individual. Third, we will address the matter of the human body and its influence. And fourth, we will consider the importance of the roles God has assigned to each person. Let's begin with personal character as an important fact in our situation.

Character

When we speak of character, we have in mind things like our individual preferences and temptations, as well as our sanctification. Each one of us has certain strengths and weaknesses. And each of us has a unique personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. And all of these factors influence our ability and inclination to make decisions that honor God.

In addition to matters of personal character, we must also factor in the experiences of each individual when we are making ethical decisions.

Experiences

Personal experiences are a bit like fingerprints. All fingerprints are made up of ridges that form patterns, such as arches and loops and whorls. And although everyone has fingerprints composed of these common elements, each fingerprint is unique.

And the same thing is true of our experiences. Most of our experiences are very common, but the combination of experiences is unique to each person. In the category of our experiences, we might include such things as our heredity, our maturity, our education, our opportunities, our status and position, and of course, everything we ever think, say or do. And as features of our ethical situation, these experiences partially determine our moral responsibilities.

Now, in one sense we all face the same temptation, namely, the temptation to violate God's law. But each of us feels this temptation in a different way. For instance, we are all tempted to steal, but the specific details of this temptation differ for each of us. And we are all tempted sexually, but the specific temptations we face vary from individual to individual. So, when we approach the topic of Christian ethics, we need to recognize that each one of us fights a unique spiritual battle. And the details of our unique battles are important facts that we need to consider.

For example, with regard to our heredity, we are all to honor our parents. But we do not all share the same parents. Rather, we are each to honor our own parents. And with regard to maturity, the way we are to honor our parents changes as we age. When we are young, we are to honor them largely by obeying and respecting them. When we mature and our parents are very old, we may need to honor them in different ways, such as by caring for their physical needs. Each experience presents us with consequent responsibilities that are in some ways unique to us. And when we are faced with ethical questions, these are important facts that we need to consider.

With these understandings of character and personal experiences in mind, we should turn to the facts related to the human body and to the influence they bear on our ethical situation.

Body

There are many facts related to our bodies that come into play in ethical situations, such as our physical age, our abilities and disabilities, our genetics, and our intellectual abilities. For instance, in Deuteronomy 1:35-39 God distinguished between adults and children in Israel in this way:

Not a man of this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your forefathers, except Caleb ... [and] Joshua... And the little ones ... your children who do not yet know good from bad — they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it (Deuteronomy 1:35-39).

When the nation of Israel rebelled against God in the wilderness, the Lord condemned the entire adult generation, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. But he did not condemn the children of this generation because they did not yet know good from bad. In this and many other ways, Scripture indicates that our ethical obligations are partially determined by our physical maturity and our intellectual abilities.

But Scripture also teaches that some facts related to our bodies are not sufficient to influence our ethical obligations. As the most prominent example in Scripture, consider the fact that sin inhabits our bodies, preventing us from being able to obey God. Yet, God does not overlook the sins we commit as a result of this problem residing in our bodies. Listen to Paul's description of this problem in Romans 7:18-24:

Nothing good dwells ... in my flesh ... For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members

of my body ... making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members... Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Romans 7:18-24, NASB).

The sin that indwells our bodies moves us to sin. But as Paul showed, the solution to this dilemma is not to deny our guilt but to cry out for a savior.

And the relationship between genetics and behavior is similar to this. Many scientists have suggested that there are correspondences between genetics, on the one hand, and behaviors such as criminal violence, alcoholism, and homosexuality on the other hand. So, it may be true that our genes as well as indwelling sin make it more difficult for us to obey the Lord's commands. Nevertheless, God's commands are normative for us. So, even when our bodies make it easy and natural for us to sin, they do not excuse us from sins that the Bible clearly condemns.

Now that we have looked at the facts related to character, personal experiences, and the human body, we are ready to address the ethical significance of the roles that God has assigned to each of us.

Roles

Each of us has multiple roles in life. In the secular world, we often fill roles such as parent, child, sibling, spouse, employer, employee, and many others as well. Beyond this, God has called people to different positions and jobs within the church so that we have elders, deacons, evangelists, teachers, and so on. And whether or not we hold a position in the church, God has spiritually gifted each believer in different ways, and he expects us to use our gifts to minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And each of these roles presents us with particular temptations and responsibilities.

For instance, if we are ministers in the church, it is our responsibility to govern, teach and reprove God's people in a wise and godly fashion. But if we are children in the church, we would be wrong to assume this type of authority and behavior. As another example, consider the fact that the New Testament teaches able-bodied adults, and especially husbands and fathers, to work to support themselves and their families. As Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:8:

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

So, we can see that it is the responsibility of some people to work to support others, specifically those that are in the role of family provider. And correspondingly, when we are charged with providing for our families, we face the temptation to avoid this responsibility.

To one degree or another, this same thing is true of every other role we fill. Each role opens us to particular temptations and lays on us particular responsibilities, and in this way each role is an important and complex fact in our ethical situation.

So, we see that when it comes to making biblical decisions, there are many facts that we must take into account that are related to our existence as human beings, both as members of society living with each other, and as individuals living with ourselves.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have outlined the major categories of facts we must keep in mind in order to answer ethical questions in a biblical manner. We have identified a number of important facts about God himself, especially his authority, control and presence. We have described the facts that make up creation in general, looking at both the natural and the preternatural realms. And we have considered humanity both in the context of society and on an individual level. These three basic categories give us a good starting point for analyzing the facts of our ethical situation.

When we approach ethics from the situational perspective, it is extremely important that we recognize and account for all the facts that influence our responsibilities before God. The most basic of these facts are always God's existence and character, but the facts related to our surroundings and to ourselves also place ethical obligations on us. So, the more facts we account for, the more confidence we can have that our ethical choices are truly biblical decisions.

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
EIGHT

THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE:
BEING GOOD



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Eight

The Existential Perspective: Being Good

INTRODUCTION

During the Middle Ages, philosophers and scientists sometimes engaged in a practice called alchemy. This was an attempt to turn inexpensive metals such as lead into valuable metals, like gold. Of course, the alchemists knew that lead could be disguised to look like gold or mixed with other substances to resemble gold. But they also knew that in order for lead truly to have the qualities of gold, its fundamental nature would have to be changed. It would actually have to become gold.

Well, something like this is true of people as well. Our words, thoughts and deeds are inseparably related to our fundamental nature. So, just as lead cannot truly have the properties of gold, people with corrupt natures cannot produce works that are truly good. Our actions always reflect our being.

This is the eighth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it “The Existential Perspective: Being Good.” In this lesson on being good, we will begin our exploration of the existential perspective by looking at the relationship between goodness and our being, focusing on how goodness relates to who we are.

As you’ll recall, in these lessons our model for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person. This model emphasizes three essential aspects of every ethical question, namely, God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision.

These three aspects of ethical judgment correspond to the three perspectives we have taken toward ethical issues throughout these lessons. The normative perspective emphasizes God’s Word and asks questions like, what do God’s norms reveal about our duty? The situational perspective focuses on facts, goals and means in ethics, and asks questions like, how can we reach goals that please God? The existential perspective centers on human beings, the persons that make ethical decisions. It poses questions like, how must we change in order to please to God? And what kind of people please him? It is this existential perspective that will occupy us for the remaining lessons in this series.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the term existential has been used in different ways by various philosophers. But in these lessons, we will use the term to refer to the human aspects of ethical questions. So, under the heading of the existential perspective, we will focus on issues like our character, our nature, the kinds of people we are and ought to be.

In this lesson in particular, we will be concerned with what it means for a person to *be* good. We all know that even the worst criminals sometimes *do* things that are good. But it is quite another thing for a person to *be* good. Being good has more to do with our identities, commitments, and motivations — the kinds of things the Bible describes as a person’s heart.

In this lesson on “Being Good” we will explore the relationship between being and goodness in terms of the three basic stages of biblical history. First, we will discuss

the period of creation, looking at God's own goodness, and at the fact that human beings were inherently good when God first created us. Second, we will turn to the period of the Fall, exploring the way sin damaged humanity's goodness. And third, we will speak of the period of redemption, when God restores those who are faithful to him and empowers them for goodness. Let's begin with creation, that time when it pleased the good Creator to make a good world and to populate it with good human beings.

CREATION

Our discussion of goodness at the time of creation will divide into two parts. First, we will speak of God and his goodness, explaining the fact that all true moral goodness is rooted in God himself. And second, we will describe how God created humanity to reflect his goodness. So at this point, let's look at the personal goodness of God.

GOD

As we explore the idea that goodness is rooted in God, we will begin by focusing on God's being, looking particularly at his character. And next, we will focus on a specific aspect of his character, namely his moral goodness. We'll start with a brief discussion of God's being.

Being

There are countless things that the Scriptures say about God's being, but for our purposes we will focus on the relationship between his essential attributes and his person. Simply put, God's attributes are inseparable from his person; they define who he is.

This is one reason that the writers of Scripture commonly describe and even name God according to his attributes. For example, he is called the "Father of Compassion" and "God of All Comfort" in 2 Corinthians 1:3. He is "God Almighty" in Ezekiel 10:5, the "God of Justice" in Malachi 2:17, and the "God of Peace" in Hebrews 13:20. He is the "Holy One" in Proverbs 9:10, and the "King of Glory" in Psalm 24:7-10.

The list could go on and on, but the important point is this: by identifying God's attributes in this way, the writers of Scripture were teaching us about God as a person; they were describing his fundamental character. For example, when David called the Lord the "King of Glory" in Psalm 24, he did not simply mean that God has a certain amount of glory or that God is sometimes glorious. Rather, he meant that God's glory is a critical aspect of the Lord's character, that it is inseparable from his person and central to his being.

As we consider God's being, it is important to remember that all of God's essential attributes are immutable, meaning that they can never change. For instance, God

cannot be holy one day but unholy the next. He cannot be all-powerful and all-knowing at certain times but limited in his power and knowledge at other times.

Scripture teaches this in many places, such as Psalm 102:25-27, Malachi 3:6, and James 1:17. But for the sake of time, let's look at just one of these. Listen to James' words in James 1:17:

The Father of the heavenly lights ... does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

Despite all the shifts and changes that take place in creation, we can rest assured that God does not change who he is. Today, God is the same person with the same essential attributes that he was before he created the world. He will remain the same person forever.

Having spoken of God's being, we are ready to turn to the goodness that God possesses in and of himself.

Goodness

When we speak about God's goodness in the context of ethics, we have in mind his moral purity and perfection. As we have seen in prior lessons, God himself is the ultimate standard of morality. There is no external standard of goodness by which he or we can be judged. Rather, whatever conforms to his character is good, and whatever does not conform to his character is evil.

1 John 1:5-7 explains this idea in terms of "light." There John wrote these words:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

In this passage, light is a metaphor for truth and moral purity, while darkness is equated with sin and lies. So, since there is no darkness in God, God is perfectly free from sin in every aspect of his being. In other words, goodness is one of God's essential attributes.

Now, as we think about God's goodness in relation to his being, it helps to think once again in terms of perspectives. You'll recall that many times throughout this series we have spoken of the importance of perspectives. For example, our model involves three perspectives: the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective. And each perspective shows us the whole of ethics from a different point of view.

Well, something like this is true of God's attributes as well. But since God has so many attributes, it is more helpful to think of them in terms of a gemstone rather than in terms of a triangle.

Put simply, each of God's attributes is a perspective on his entire being. Each of God's attributes is dependent on the others and qualified by the others.

For instance, consider just three of God's attributes: authority, justice and goodness. God's authority is good and just. That is to say, it is good and just that God possesses this authority, and he wields his authority in good and just ways. Similarly, his justice is authoritative and good. When God pronounces judgments, they are always authoritative and good. And in the same way, his goodness is authoritative and just. His goodness upholds justice and blesses those who are just, and it also sets the authoritative standard by which all goodness is judged.

Traditionally, theologians have spoken of the interrelatedness of God's attributes under the heading of God's simplicity. By this term, theologians mean that God is not a composite of various unrelated parts, but a unified being of absolute integrity. Or to use our gemstone illustration, he is not a piece of jewelry containing many different gems, but rather a single gemstone with many facets.

It's important to understand this fact because it means that nothing in God's being can contradict his goodness or offer an opposing standard for us to follow. For example, we can never appeal to God's justice to contradict the implications of his goodness. In the character of God, if something is just, it is also good. And if it is good, it is necessarily just. His attributes always agree because they always describe the same consistent, unified person.

Having seen that all true moral goodness is rooted in the being of God, we are ready to consider the fact that God created humanity to be good. That is, he created us to reflect his personal goodness.

HUMANITY

The account of creation in Genesis 1 is familiar to most Christians. We know that God created the heavens and the earth, shaping them to give them form. And we know that he filled them with inhabitants so they would not be empty. And of course, the pinnacle of the creative week was the creation of humanity on the sixth day. Listen to Genesis 1:27-28 where Moses recorded these words:

God created man in his own image ... God blessed [humanity] and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:27-28).

Our discussion of the goodness of humanity will focus on three details of humanity's creation mentioned in the verses we just read. First, we will consider the fact that humanity was created as the image of God, the visible representation of God that depicted his goodness. Second, we will speak of God's blessing on humanity. And third, we will mention the cultural mandate that God assigned to the human race. Let's begin with the image of God borne by humanity at creation.

Image

As we saw in Genesis 1:27, Moses wrote that:

God created man in his own image (Genesis 1:27).

Now, when theologians talk about humanity as the image of God, they often speak of attributes like reason, spirituality, moral nature, immortality, and our original righteousness. And it is true that to some degree human beings share these attributes in common with God.

But perhaps one of the best ways to understand the image of God is to look at how the ancient world conceived of images. During the time that Genesis was written, it was common for kings to erect statues and other images of themselves around their kingdoms. These statues were to be treated with respect because they were the king's surrogates. They reminded the people to love, honor and obey him.

In a similar way, God, the great king over all creation, appointed human beings to be his living images. So, when we see a human being, we see an image that reminds us of God. And when we wrongfully disrespect human beings, we dishonor the Lord whose image they are. Consider, for instance, Genesis 9:6, where God gave this instruction:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man (Genesis 9:6).

The reason that murderers were liable unto death was not just that they had taken a human life, but that they had assaulted the image of God; they had mounted an attack against the honor of the great king.

And beyond this, the ancient world also associated divine images with divine sonship. Specifically, the ancient kings were thought to be images of the gods as well as sons of the gods. So, in Genesis, when God made men and women in his image, he also declared the human race to be his royal children.

In fact, it is humanity's role as God's representatives and offspring that forms the basis for many of the other conclusions we draw about our goodness. Because God wanted us to be representatives and children, he created us with qualities that reflected his own perfections. Of course, humanity was not exactly like God, infinitely perfect in every way. But we were created without flaw and without sin, in conformity to the standard of his character. In this way, God established humanity with our own attribute of goodness rooted in our very being.

Blessing

This outlook on the creation of humanity as the image of God is confirmed by the fact that God pronounced a blessing on humanity. One phrase in Genesis 1:28 records an important event that took place when humanity was created. As we read there:

God blessed them (Genesis 1:28).

You will recall that throughout this series, we have defined Christian ethics as:

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

By this definition, we have defined “good” not only in terms of God’s character, but also in terms of what he blesses and approves. Whatever God blesses and approves is good, and whatever God curses and condemns is evil.

So, when God blessed humanity in the creation account, he indicated that humanity was morally good. And significantly, Genesis gives no indication that humanity had done anything to earn this blessing. On the contrary, they had only just been created, so God’s blessing was not an affirmation of their behavior but of their very being. He blessed them because they had the innate attribute of goodness.

Now that we have looked at humanity as the image of God and considered God’s blessing on humanity, we should briefly address the cultural mandate that God assigned to the human race.

Cultural Mandate

As we saw earlier in this lesson, Genesis 1:28 records God’s cultural mandate to humanity. We read these words here:

God ... said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground”(Genesis 1:28).

In keeping with humanity’s role as God’s image, God appointed humanity to be his vassal kings on the earth, to fill, subdue and rule it for his glory. By this assignment, God indicated that humanity was not only physically capable of accomplishing this task but morally capable as well.

As we were originally created, human beings were able to build a holy, righteous kingdom fit for God’s habitation. And we were able to minister in the Lord’s manifest presence without being destroyed. To do this, God created us morally pure in our being, possessing the attribute of goodness and being free from the corruption of sin. And as a result, we were able to choose and to act in morally good ways.

So, we see that for God and for humanity, goodness was rooted in our very being. God’s being is unchanging, and therefore his goodness is unchanging, too. But sadly, humanity’s being changed for the worse. God created us with innate goodness. But as we will see, sin corrupted our being, so that it was no longer a source of goodness.

Now that we have considered the relationship between goodness and being as it was manifested at creation, we are ready to turn to the period of the Fall. Specifically, we will look at the way sin damaged humanity’s being, and thereby destroyed our goodness.

FALL

We are all familiar with the Bible's account of humanity's fall into sin, recorded in Genesis 3. God had created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. And although he had given them great freedom in the garden, he had also given them a specific prohibition: they were not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But of course, the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit, and she did. Then she gave some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it as well. And as a result of the fall into sin, God cursed Adam and Eve with severe consequences that applied not only to them, but also to the entire human race that was to descend from them.

We will mention three consequences of humanity's fall into sin. First, we will speak of the corruption of our nature. Second, we will see that the Fall caused our will to become enslaved to sin so that we lost our ability to choose and to do morally good things. And third, we will discuss the ways that the Fall affected our knowledge, so that we became incapable of fully recognizing moral goodness. Let's begin with the corruption of our nature that occurred when humanity fell into sin.

NATURE

When we speak of the nature of human beings, we have in mind our fundamental character, the central aspects of our being.

As we have seen, when God created Adam and Eve, they were perfect and sinless. All their characteristics and attributes were good and pleasing to God. And therefore, we can say that human nature was morally good at the time of creation. But at the Fall, God cursed Adam and Eve for their sin. And as part of this curse, he changed their nature so that the fundamental character of the human race was no longer morally good but morally evil.

In Romans 5:12, 19 Paul wrote these words about the curse on Adam:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ... Through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners (Romans 5:12, 19).

Adam's one sin resulted in the fall of all human beings into sin. And the corresponding curse on humanity corrupted the nature of each one of us, leading to death and sin. Listen to Romans 8:5-8 where Paul described the effects of the Fall in this way:

Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh ... For the mind set on the flesh ... is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do

so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8 NASB).

Fallen humanity's nature has been corrupted so that it is no longer morally good. On the contrary, our fallen nature is evil. We desire sin. We hate God. We rebel against his law. We cannot please God. And we cannot gain his approval or blessing.

Having spoken of the corruption of our nature, we are ready to look at the way the human will became enslaved to sin as a consequence of the Fall.

WILL

We should begin by offering a definition of will. Typically, when theologians speak of our will, they have in mind our personal faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, and intending. Simply put, our will is what we use to make decisions and choices, as well as to consider things that we would like to have, or to do, or to experience.

Now, like the rest of our attributes and faculties, our will reflects our nature. Prior to the Fall, the human will was perfect, created to reflect God and his character, and able to think and to choose in ways that were morally good. But as the Fall proved, the human will was also created with the capacity to make choices that did not please God.

As we have already seen, in the Fall Adam and Eve used their wills to choose sin instead of loyalty to God. And so God cursed the human race. And one consequence of this was that our wills were corrupted, making it impossible for us to want to please God.

In Romans 6–8 Paul uses the metaphor of slavery to describe this curse on the human will. He indicated that sin indwells fallen human beings, enslaving our wills so that we always desire and choose sin. Listen once more to Romans 8:5-8 where Paul wrote these words:

Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh ... For the mind set on the flesh ... is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8 NASB).

Sin controls fallen human beings, making it impossible for us to submit to God's law or to do anything that pleases him.

Now, this does not mean that we no longer have wills or that we no longer make genuine choices. On the contrary, we continue to will and to choose according to our nature. But because our nature has been corrupted, we are incapable of doing anything that honors and glorifies God. Sin taints everything we think, say and do.

Now, at first glance this assessment of fallen human will may seem extreme. After all, sinful people do things that certainly appear to be good. Well, in one sense it would be foolish to deny this. But we must always be careful to look beyond the surface in order to understand the true character of the things that fallen, unredeemed people do.

You may recall that earlier in this series, we turned to the *Westminster Confession*

of *Faith* chapter 16, paragraph 7 to help explain this complex issue. Listen once again to what it says:

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

These words nicely summarize the Bible's teaching about the ethical condition of unregenerate human beings — those who have not yet been redeemed by Christ. And as the Confession says, there is a sense in which unregenerate people obey God's commands, as well as a sense in which they do things that are good.

Jesus taught this same principle in Matthew 7:9-11, where he spoke these words:

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

Most people do at least some things that are outwardly good, such as loving and providing for their children. So, there is a superficial sense in which even unbelievers perform the types of behavior that God blesses.

Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession rightly points out another sense in which these actions are actually sinful and cannot please God. And the reason is that these acts only meet *some* of the requirements for righteousness.

The Confession summarizes the teaching of Scripture by pointing out that our works must pass five tests in order to be truly good. First, they must be works that God commands. Second, they must be of good use to ourselves and to others. Third, they must proceed from a heart that is purified by faith. Fourth, they must be done in a right manner. And fifth, they must be done for the right end, which is the glory of God.

This point of view lines up with the approach toward ethics we have taken throughout this series. First, the fact that good works are those that God commands parallels the normative perspective in which all works are judged according to the standard of God's character as it is revealed in his Word.

Second, the emphases on good use, right end and right manner summarize the facts, goals and means of the situational perspective.

And third, the fact that good works must proceed from a heart purified by faith corresponds to the existential perspective in which authentically good works can only be done by people whose goodness has been restored through their faith in God.

Unfortunately for fallen humanity, our beings are corrupt so that we do not naturally have hearts purified by faith. And our will does not desire or strive for the right end, namely God's glory. And we refuse to submit to God's law. So, while unregenerate people can still make choices that look good on the surface, these choices are never truly

good.

Now that we have looked at the way the Fall has corrupted our nature and enslaved our will to sin, we are ready to speak about our knowledge, focusing especially on the way the Fall damaged our ability to understand God's standard.

KNOWLEDGE

It may seem odd to some of us to speak of the Fall as damaging our ability to obtain moral knowledge. After all, unbelievers can pick up a Bible and understand its commands. And Scripture itself affirms that unbelievers know many true things about God. But when we look more closely at the Scriptures, we see that while fallen and unredeemed human beings possess some true knowledge, the Fall has prevented them from obtaining a proper knowledge of God's commands.

Our discussion of the Fall's affect on moral knowledge will divide into three parts. First, we will speak of the way sin hinders humanity's access to revelation. Second, we will mention the way sin prevents humanity's understanding of revelation. And third, we will investigate sin's impact on humanity's obedience to revelation. Let's begin with the way humanity's access to revelation has been hindered by the Fall.

Access to Revelation

One of the chief ways the Fall has hindered humanity's access to revelation is by limiting the Holy Spirit's work of illumination and inward leading. Now, this is not because the Holy Spirit is somehow incapable of ministering to fallen human beings. Rather, it is because God cursed humanity by withholding these divine gifts.

As you will recall from our previous lessons, illumination is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive, such as the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, which Peter received in Matthew 16:17.

And inward leading is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive. It includes things such as our conscience, and the sense that God would have us take a particular course of action.

In some sense, God provides a measure of both illumination and inward leading to all fallen human beings. For instance, even unbelievers have an instinctive knowledge of God's law. Many of them desire justice and recognize that it is wrong to steal and to murder. Similarly, unbelievers are often convicted by their consciences when they commit certain sins.

But the Holy Spirit does not provide the same measure of illumination and inward leading to unbelievers that he provides to believers. He works within them only enough to condemn them for their violations of God's laws. And the reason for this is simple: God has chosen to reveal himself in ways that bless those who love him and that curse those who hate him.

Compare John 17:26, where Jesus prayed these words to his Father:

I have made you known to [those you have given me], and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them (John 17:26).

Jesus made himself known to believers in order to build love and unity between the Lord and his people. By contrast, he provides his enemies with only a little knowledge of himself — just enough to bring them under judgment.

In addition to reducing fallen humanity's access to revelation, the Fall has also hindered humanity's understanding of revelation.

Understanding of Revelation

Humanity's fall into sin profoundly reduced our ability to make sense of God's revelation. Even though fallen human beings still have access to much of God's revelation, we lack many of the skills needed to comprehend it. We still have the cognitive ability to understand the basic teachings of God's revelation. But moral understanding depends on more than mere cognition; it involves the whole person.

Our ethical judgments are not detached assessments of facts. Rather, many non-cognitive factors influence our ethical evaluations, such as our emotions, consciences, intuitions, loyalties, desires, fears, weaknesses, failures, natural rejection of God, and much more.

In Matthew 13:13-15, Jesus referred to this problem when he explained his use of parables:

Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes" (Matthew 13:13-15).

Fallen human beings still have eyes and ears to receive God's revelation. But our hearts are hardened against God and his truth. And this often prevents us from properly understanding the revelation we receive.

In Ephesians 4:17-18, Paul spoke about the problem in this way:

You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding ... because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts (Ephesians 4:17-18).

The corruption of human nature in the Fall resulted in the hardening of our hearts. And this hardening keeps us from properly understanding God's revelation.

In many ways, our logic and intellect still function as they should. And this is one reason that God still holds us accountable for understanding his revelation. But the Fall

has corrupted us so that we oppose God and resist his truth. So, instead of accepting true knowledge from God, we delude ourselves into believing the lies that our sinful hearts invent.

Having seen that fallen human beings have reduced access to revelation and darkened understanding of revelation, we should turn to the way our obedience to revelation has also been corrupted by the Fall.

Obedience to Revelation

Now, it may seem odd to think of obedience as an aspect of knowledge. After all, we normally think of revelation as providing us with knowledge, and we think of obedience as a separate step that follows knowledge. And there is a sense in which this is correct. But there is another sense in which knowledge and obedience are essentially the same thing. And in this sense, the Fall hinders our knowledge of God by destroying our ability to obey him.

To understand how our inability to obey God impedes our knowledge of his standard, we will focus on just two aspects of the relationship between knowledge and obedience. First, in Scripture, there is a reciprocal relationship between obedience and knowledge. And second, we will consider some of the ways in which it can be said that in the Bible these two ideas are inseparable from one another. We'll begin with the idea that obedience leads to knowledge of God and of his standard.

In Scripture, there is a reciprocal relationship between obedience and knowledge. On one side, knowledge of God produces obedience to God. We see this in passages like 2 Peter 1:3 where Peter wrote these words:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:3).

Here, knowledge is given for the purpose of producing life and godliness in our lives.

Again, this follows the pattern we have come to expect: first we receive and understand God's revelation, and then we obediently apply it to our lives. But the reverse is also true. In Scripture, obedience is a prerequisite for knowledge, and the obedient application of God's revelation in our lives leads to knowledge of him. As Proverbs 1:7 teaches us:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).

And as we read in Proverbs 15:33:

The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom (Proverbs 15:33).

In these verses and many others throughout Scripture, knowledge flows from obedience. That is to say, when we submit ourselves to God's lordship, we are in a position to understand his revelation.

But the Fall has corrupted our nature and our will to the point that we rebel against God. In fact, we are incapable of submitting to his Word.

And since knowledge flows from obedience, people who are unable to obey God are also unable to know him in the truest sense of the word. Or to put it another way, just as obedience leads to knowledge, sin leads to ignorance.

Having seen the problems created by the Fall, because obedience leads to knowledge of revelation, we are ready to consider the idea that in the Bible, these two ideas are inseparable from one another.

In Scripture, it is often the case that the concepts of obedience and knowledge are essentially synonymous. Sometimes they are set in apposition to one another so that one concept follows and explains the other. For instance listen to Hosea 6:6 in the New American Standard Bible:

I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6, NASB).

In this verse, the phrases loyalty rather than sacrifice and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings are in apposition to one another, meaning that the second phrase restates the first one for clarification. So, sacrifice is synonymous with burnt offerings, and loyalty, a form of obedience, is synonymous with knowledge of God.

At other times, either obedience or knowledge is provided as a definition for the other. For example, in Jeremiah 22:16, the Lord spoke these words:

He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? (Jeremiah 22:16).

Here, knowledge of God is defined in terms of obedience rendered to God, particularly in the form of preserving justice.

Third, Scripture sometimes demonstrates the similarity between obedience and knowledge by using one as an example of the other. Consider Hosea 4:1 where the Prophet accused Israel in this way:

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1).

Hosea listed three things that the Israelites had failed to do and that had resulted in God's anger: they were unfaithful, they were unloving, and they did not know God. By including knowledge of God in this list of ethical examples, Hosea indicated that knowledge is part of obedience, and that we have an ethical responsibility to know the Lord.

Now, obedience and knowledge do not always mean the same thing. Nevertheless, Scripture ties these ideas together quite closely teaching that, in a very important sense, if we can't obey God, we can't know him.

The Fall devastated humanity. God's curse on Adam and Eve corrupted the nature, will, and knowledge of every human being who descended from them through natural means. And the ethical consequences of this are staggering — no fallen human being can think, say or do anything that is morally good. All our thoughts, words and deeds are sinful in some measure because we are fallen, sinful people. So, whenever we make ethical decisions, we have to consider the ways that the Fall has affected every person involved.

Having considered the matter of goodness and being during the periods of creation and the Fall, we are ready to explore the period of redemption, the time when God restores those who trust him for salvation, and empowers them for goodness.

REDEMPTION

The period of redemption began immediately after the Fall when God extended mercy to Adam and Eve — even as he cursed them for their sin. In earlier lessons, we have referred to this as the *protoevangelion* or “first gospel,” when God offered to send a redeemer to repair the damage done by the Fall.

But the period of redemption did not immediately eradicate all the effects of the Fall. Rather, redemption has been a slow process, and it will not be completed until Jesus returns in glory. Until then, the Fall continues to have consequences for all human beings, including believers.

Even so, as individuals are redeemed, as unbelievers become believers, they are rescued from the consequences of the Fall in important and wonderful ways.

We will discuss the redemption of individual believers as a reversal of the Fall in ways that parallel our previous discussion. First, we will focus on our nature, speaking of how redemption restores our innate goodness. Second, we will talk about our human will and our freedom from sin. And third, we will focus on knowledge, the restoration of our ability to make proper use of God's revelation. Let's begin with how our nature is restored when we are redeemed.

NATURE

You'll recall that our nature is our fundamental character; the central aspects of our being. And as we have seen, our fallen nature is evil. We hate God and love sin, and we are incapable of moral goodness.

But when we are redeemed in Christ, our nature is renewed. When the Holy Spirit regenerates us, he gives us a good nature, one that loves God and hates sin. And he restores our moral ability so that we become capable of true goodness. Listen to Ezekiel 36:26 where God spoke about the future redemption that would come in Christ:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

And in Romans 6:6-11 Paul spoke of the matter in this way:

Our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been freed from sin... Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:6-11).

The consistent witness of both the Old and the New Testaments is that fallen human beings have sinful hearts and spirits. But when God redeems us, he recreates us, giving us new hearts and spirits that are righteous rather than sinful. And with these new natures, we are for the first time able to love God and to submit to his Word and thereby to gain his blessings.

Of course, our redemption is not yet complete so that even with our new natures, we are still tainted by sin. This is why in Mark 10:18 Jesus made the statement:

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

Redeemed humanity has a measure of goodness, but we are not perfect beings like God is. Even so, our new natures make it possible for God to bless us in wonderful ways.

With this understanding of our redeemed nature in mind, we should turn to the restoration of our will that takes place when we begin to experience redemption.

WILL

Our will is our personal faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, and intending. As we have seen, the Fall into sin made it impossible for us to use our wills in pure and righteous ways. Paul described this corruption in terms of slavery, teaching that our fallen, unredeemed wills are in slavery to the sin that indwells us. Because of this slavery to sin, we have no ability to make choices that please God, and we have no desire to please him.

But when we come to faith in Christ, sin's hold over our will is broken so that we are no longer forced to desire and to choose sin. Moreover, the Holy Spirit indwells us, strengthening and moving our wills to love and to obey the Lord. The Lord spoke of this aspect of redemption in Ezekiel 36:27, where he offered this blessing to accompany redemption:

I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:27).

And as Paul wrote in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Now, we need to remember that the renewal of our will does not completely solve the problem of sin in our lives. We are still indwelt by sin, so that we must constantly fight against it. But the difference is this: we are no longer enslaved by sin, forced to do its bidding. Even so, it can still be very hard to resist sin. Paul described this struggle in Romans 7:21-23, where he wrote these words about the Christian life:

When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members (Romans 7:21-23).

We can summarize the Bible's teaching on the human will in this way: At creation, our will was able both to sin and to resist sin, but when humanity fell into sin, we lost our ability to resist sin. At the same time, sin came to dwell in us as a master, enslaving our wills.

In redemption, our wills are restored, and sin's mastery is broken so that we are once again able to resist sin. And the Holy Spirit indwells us in order to strengthen and motivate us against sin.

Unfortunately, in this present stage of redemption, sin still indwells us, leaving us to struggle between the influence of sin and the influence of the Holy Spirit. But when Jesus returns to complete our redemption, we will be free from sin's indwelling presence and influenced only by the Holy Spirit so that we will never choose sin again.

Now that we have considered our nature and will, we are ready to talk about the restoration of our knowledge when we are redeemed.

KNOWLEDGE

As before, our discussion of knowledge will divide into three parts: first, we will talk about our access to revelation; second, our understanding of revelation; and third, our obedience to revelation. Let's begin with the way our access to revelation is restored in redemption.

Access to Revelation

As you will recall, the Fall significantly restricts humanity's access to illumination from the Holy Spirit, which is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive.

We also saw that the Fall restricts our access to the Holy Spirit's inward leading, which is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive.

But in redemption, we have greater access to these ministries of the Holy Spirit. Rather than simply giving us enough revelation to condemn us, the Spirit convinces us of the truth of the gospel and of many other things that are part of our salvation. He makes our consciences sensitive to God's character and gives us godly intuitions. For example, listen to John's words in 1 John 2:27:

[The Holy One's] anointing teaches you about all things (1 John 2:27).

And in Ephesians 1:17, Paul spoke of illumination and inward leading in this way:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better (Ephesians 1:17).

Besides restoring our access to revelation, redemption also restores our understanding of revelation, again through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Understanding of Revelation

As we have seen, the Fall caused us to become God's enemies and to resist his truth so that instead of accepting true knowledge from God, we delude ourselves into believing lies. But when we are saved, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that we love God instead of hating him. And he renews our minds so that we are able to grasp the truths that God reveals.

In 1 Corinthians 2:12-16 Paul explained our redeemed understanding of revelation in this way:

We have ... received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us... The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them... But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:12-16).

Without the Spirit of God indwelling us, we would not be able to understand God's truth. Our rebellion against God would cloud our reason, and we would believe all sorts of errors about God's character and works. But the Holy Spirit guards our hearts and our minds, destroying sin's ability to deceive us and empowering us to understand revelation. Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 1:9:

Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).

Paul knew that no believer has a perfect understanding of God's revelation. So, he continually prayed for the believers in Colosse to receive further understanding. And just like them, we also need the constant ministry of the Holy Spirit so that our own understanding can increase.

So far, we have seen that redemption restores our knowledge by giving us access to revelation and by helping us form a proper understanding of revelation. At this point we are ready to talk about the way redemption restores our knowledge by fostering obedience to revelation.

Obedience to Revelation

Previously in this lesson, we described the relationship between obedience and knowledge in two ways. First, in Scripture there is a reciprocal relationship between obedience and knowledge. And second, in the Bible these two ideas are inseparable from one another.

And our discussion of the way redemption fosters obedience to revelation will follow a similar pattern. First, we will speak of the fact that there is a reciprocal relationship between redemption and obedience. And second, we will consider some of the ways in which it can be said that in the Bible these two ideas are inseparable from one another. We'll begin with the fact that redemption leads to obedience.

Scripture makes it clear that one of the main features of redemption is the obedience it produces in the lives of believers. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance and indwelling power, believers behave differently from the rest of the world. Fallen humanity hates God and cannot obey him. But redeemed humanity loves God and does obey him. The apostle John wrote about this idea frequently, such as in 1 John 2:3-6. Listen to his words there:

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:3-6).

The Scriptures often speak of this work of the Spirit in terms of the fruit of the Spirit. For instance, in Matthew 3 John the Baptist demanded that his disciples produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And in Galatians 5, Paul contrasted the evil things that sin produces in the lives of unbelievers with the good things that the Holy Spirit produces in the lives of believers. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 5:22-23:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Through his indwelling and redeeming presence, the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of righteousness in our lives. He leads us to obey God in many ways so that we exhibit many moral and spiritual virtues.

Having looked at the fact that redemption leads to obedience, we should turn to the fact that these two ideas are inseparable from one another — that to be redeemed is to obey the Lord.

Many passages in Scripture indicate that redemption and obedience are one and the same thing. Typically, they do this by defining believers as those who are obedient to the Lord. Sometimes, this is because conversion to Christ is an act of obedience. This includes things such as our faith in Christ and our repentance from our sins. For instance, in 1 Peter 1:22-23, the apostle gave this instruction:

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again (1 Peter 1:22-23).

Peter spoke here of conversion to Christ when we are born again. And he identified this conversion as obedience to the truth.

At other times, redemption is equated with obedience because redeemed people are obedient to the Lord in many different ways. We follow his commandments because we love him. As Hebrews 5:9 says:

[Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9).

In this context, the author of Hebrews was referring to Jesus' ongoing priestly work in heaven, in which he maintains our salvation through his continual intercession on our behalf. He does this for all those whose lives are characterized by obedience to him, that is, for all those who believe and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

As we consider the relationship between redemption and obedience, the point we want to keep in mind is this: Redemption produces obedience to God, and obedience to God produces knowledge of God and his ways.

Recall once again that the Fall corrupted our knowledge partly by making it impossible for us to obey the Lord. Correspondingly, one way that redemption reverses the curse of the Fall is by restoring our obedience, which in turn produces knowledge of God.

In light of the fact that redemption restores our knowledge of God, it should not surprise us that Scripture often summarizes redemption in terms of knowledge of God. This knowledge consists partly of cognitive content, such as knowing the facts of the gospel. But it also includes experiential and relational knowledge, such as when we speak of knowing a person. We find this teaching in places like Psalm 36:10, Daniel 11:32, and 2 John verse 1. As Jesus prayed in John 17:3:

This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).

So, in the period of redemption, our innate goodness is restored in the renewal of our nature, in the restoration of our will, and in the new knowledge of God. And by this redemption of our beings, we obtain the ability to perform good works: to say and to think and to do those things that God blesses.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have begun our exploration of the existential perspective by exploring the relationship between goodness and being. We have looked at goodness historically, beginning with the time of creation where we saw that goodness was rooted in the being of God and that humanity was created with an innately good being. Next, we saw that the Fall destroyed humanity's innate goodness, making us incapable of morally good behavior. And finally, we saw that in the period of redemption, the goodness of our being is restored when we come to salvation in Christ, making us capable of morally good behavior.

As we work to make biblical decisions in the modern world, it is important to remember that true goodness always involves matching our character to God's character. The bad news is that we are fallen and indwelt by sin, incapable of reflecting God's goodness. But the good news is that when the Holy Spirit applies redemption to us, he indwells us and gives us new natures so that we are able to live in ways that God approves and blesses. And if we keep these facts in mind, we will have a greater ability to answer our ethical questions in ways that please our glorious Lord.

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
NINE

THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE:
INTENDING GOOD



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Nine

The Existential Perspective: Intending Good

INTRODUCTION

Every parent knows that children sometimes break things. It may be a dish, a toy, or a decoration. But once in a while, all children leave a little destruction in their wake. Now, as parents, there are a number of ways we can respond. If the child breaks something on purpose, we may be angry. We may also be cross if the child is careless or disobedient at the time. But if it was truly accidental, we might not be upset at all.

Why do we react in these different ways? Our responses are different because we take our children's motives into account. We may have no reaction at all, a mild sympathetic reaction, or even a reaction of anger, depending on how we assess their motives. And something similar is true in ethical decisions, even for adults. Ethics must never be divorced from our motives. Our motives, desires and intentions are important factors to consider in every ethical choice we make.

This is the ninth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*. And we have entitled this lesson "The Existential Perspective: Intending Good." In this lesson, we will investigate the existential perspective on ethics by looking at the ways our motives and intentions affect the morality of our decisions.

As you will recall, our paradigm for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. When we look at our choices in the light of the norms of God's Word, we are using the normative perspective. When we pay attention to circumstances, we are using the situational perspective. And when we consider the persons involved in ethical questions, we are using the existential perspective. In this lesson we will continue our investigation of the existential perspective.

We introduced the existential perspective in our last lesson by exploring the kind of people or persons it takes to make a good ethical choice. Specifically, it takes good people, good in the sense that they have been redeemed by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In this lesson, we will focus on another aspect of the existential perspective: our ethical motives. As we will see, in order to please God, good people must do the right thing for the right reason; their motives must be righteous.

Our lesson on intending good will divide into three main parts. First, we will discuss the importance of motives, answering questions like, what is a motive and how do motives relate to good behavior? Second, we will speak of the motive of faith as a critical aspect of biblical ethics. And third, we will focus on the motive of love that the Bible encourages us to have. Let's begin with the importance of motives in ethics.

IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVES

We will discuss the importance of motives first by considering the concept of motive, and second by speaking of the necessity of having proper motives. Let's start by looking at the concept of motive.

CONCEPT

There are two basic ways that we commonly speak about motives. On the one hand, a motive can be the purpose for which we take an action — what we hope to accomplish. And on the other hand, a motive can be the cause of an action.

In the first sense, motives are essentially the same as goals, which we have dealt with in earlier lessons on the situational perspective. So, in this lesson, we will focus on motives as causes of actions.

The concept of cause and effect is well-known from ordinary experience. For instance, when a person kicks a ball, we say that the kick is the cause that moves the ball. And the ball's movement is the effect or result of the kick. We might think of many other examples as well. Rain causes the effect of wet ground. Closing our eyes causes us not to see. Working hard all day long causes us to be tired.

Well, something similar is true with human motives and actions. Motives serve as causes, and our actions are the effects they produce. In this sense, a motive is an inward disposition that moves us to action. Inward dispositions are things like character traits, desires, feelings, commitments, and anything else within us that cause us to act.

With this basic idea of motives in mind, we need to make three brief comments.

Complex

First, motives are usually complex. In normal circumstances, many character traits, desires, feelings and commitments work together to lead us to ethical decisions.

For example, consider a father who goes to work to earn a living for his family. He loves his wife and children, he is committed to providing for them, and he desires food, clothing and shelter for himself. At the same time, he may have conflicting desires, such as the desire to stay home and relax, or to work on his house, or to go on vacation. All of these inward dispositions exist in varying degrees of tension and harmony within him. But in the end, on most days the collective impact of these motives causes him to go to work.

General and Specific

Second, some motives are very general, and some are very specific. And many motives exist somewhere between these extremes.

For instance, our Christian desire to share the gospel with the lost is a general motive. We are motivated by our desire for people to believe in Jesus and for the whole world to be brought into his kingdom. But sometimes we may be motivated to share the gospel in a specific way with a specific individual whom we have met. And still other times our motives might lie between those two extremes; we might go out looking for unbelievers with whom we can share the gospel.

Known and Unknown

Third, in addition to being complex and more or less general and specific, our motives can be both known and unknown to us. We know some of our motives well, but we can never be fully aware of all our motives.

For instance, if a man eats a meal, we might rightly say that his motive is hunger. Hunger is an internal feeling and state of being, and a hungry man is usually aware of his hunger.

But psychology and common experience have taught us that sometimes people eat because they are unhappy and want to be comforted. In these instances, the people who eat are often unaware that their underlying motive is to be comforted, to stop feeling unhappy.

Having discussed the basic concept and some of the complexities of motives, we are ready to turn to the necessity of having the right motive. Why are motives so important in ethics?

NECESSITY

Unfortunately, Christians often fall into the trap of believing that being ethical is merely a matter of outward obedience to the will of God. We mistakenly think that God does not require us to have the right motives and desires. Sometimes this is because behaviors are easier to identify and to correct. Sometimes it's because our pastors and teachers consistently draw our attention to behaviors rather than to inner desires and commitments. And there are other reasons as well. Nevertheless, the Bible makes it clear that if we are to be truly ethical, our God-honoring behaviors must be rooted in God-honoring motives.

We will explore the necessity of having the right motive in three ways. First, we will look at the Bible's requirement that good works flow from the heart. Second, we will consider the Bible's condemnation of hypocrisy. And third, we will speak of the fact that Christian virtue is a source of ethically good motives. Let's begin with the idea that good works must be done from the heart.

Heart

Scripture speaks of the human heart in many different ways. But for our purposes, we will concentrate on its description of the heart as the depth of our inner person and the

seat of our motives. Or to put it in the terms we used earlier in this lesson, we will focus on the heart as the sum of all our inward dispositions. In this sense there is a great deal of overlap between the biblical concepts of heart, mind, thoughts, spirit and soul.

Listen to 1 Chronicles 28:9, where David drew a close association between motives and the heart:

My son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts (1 Chronicles 28:9).

In this passage, David taught his son that obedience to God must flow from the depths of our inner person. It involves wholehearted devotion and a willing mind. God is not just interested in outward obedience. He requires every heart and every motive behind the thoughts to be truly committed to him. He requires genuine obedience that flows from our deepest thoughts and desires.

Many passages in Scripture teach that obedience must flow from good motives, such as Deuteronomy 6:5-6 and 30:2-17; Joshua 22:5; 1 Kings 8:61; Psalm 119:34; Matthew 12:34-35; Romans 6:17-18; and Ephesians 6:5-6 — just to name a few. By way of example, let's look at one passage from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

First, listen to the words of Deuteronomy 6:5-6:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments ... are to be upon your hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5-6).

As we see in this passage, in the Old Testament God required his people to love him with their hearts. God's law was to be written on their hearts, so that they would obey him from their hearts.

And this is also true in the New Testament. For example, listen to these words from Romans 6:17-18:

Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:17-18).

The Greek expression translated here "wholeheartedly" is *ek kardias*. More literally, this could be translated "out of the heart." As Paul taught here, God requires wholehearted obedience — obedience that flows from the heart.

Having seen that good motives are necessary because good works must be done from the heart, we should turn to a second reason that we must have good motives when we make ethical decisions: Scripture's teaching on hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy comes in many forms in the Scriptures, but here we are particularly interested in hypocrisy as the false appearance of morality. When our outward behavior seems to conform to God's word but our motives do not, we are acting hypocritically, and our actions do not please God.

Listen to Jesus' teachings in Matthew 6:2-16:

When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men... And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men... When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting (Matthew 6:2-16).

Giving to the needy, praying and fasting were good and righteous behaviors, in and of themselves. But in these cases, Jesus condemned them as hypocritical because they were motivated by pride rather than by love for God and neighbor. By condemning evil motives in this way, the Bible's teachings against hypocrisy indicate that good behavior must always flow from good motives.

Now, we have to be careful not to limit hypocrisy to pretentious unbelievers; even Christians can have motives that do not match their outward actions. Perhaps the most blatant example of this in Scripture is the way certain Jewish Christians in Galatia treated the Gentile believers. These Jewish Christians had ceased to observe many traditional Jewish practices, knowing that Christ's death and resurrection required them to apply Old Testament principles in new ways. Even so, they maintained some outmoded traditions that allowed them to be honored more highly than the Gentiles in the church.

Surprisingly, even the apostle Peter and the missionary Barnabas were among these Christian hypocrites. This is all the more shocking when we consider that Peter was the first one to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (as we read in Acts 10), and that Barnabas had been one of the first missionaries to the Gentile world (as we read in Acts 13). Listen to Paul's account of this problem in Galatians 2:11-13:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray (Galatians 2:11-13).

In response to this hypocrisy, Paul rebuked Peter to his face, pointing out that Peter himself lived like a Gentile and not like a Jew. Peter knew that in Christ Gentiles were equal to Jews. But for fear of losing respect, he was willing to act in ways that suggested the Gentile Christians were inferior to Jewish Christians. Peter's actions were

hypocritical because he was motivated by a selfish desire to preserve his reputation rather than by a godly desire to honor God and his church.

Now that we have seen that good works must be done from the heart and without hypocrisy, we are ready to look at a third reason for the necessity of good motives, namely, the virtue that should characterize followers of Christ.

Virtue

In simple terms, virtue is praiseworthy moral character. We might also speak of virtues in the plural, referring to the different aspects of a praiseworthy moral character. Virtue is important to our discussion of motives because virtuous character expresses itself in the form of good motives. The Scriptures have several lists of what we might call virtues, but perhaps the most familiar is Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul described the fruit of the Spirit in this way:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

This list is not exhaustive, but it's a good summary of the moral qualities God wants his people to have. Each of these virtues should be an inward disposition that moves us to ethical actions. And in this sense virtues are motives.

For example, the virtue of Christian love should motivate us to act in loving ways. Similarly, people who are joyful in the Spirit will be motivated by their joy. Peaceful people will be motivated by the peace within them. Patient people will be motivated by their patience. As Jesus taught in Matthew 12:35:

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him (Matthew 12:35).

For the remainder of this lesson, we will focus on the virtues of love and faith because Scripture says they are required for good works. In preparation for this, let's look briefly at the idea that unless we possess the virtues of love and faith, and unless those virtues motivate our behavior, nothing we do can be considered good. Think first about the way that Paul spoke about love to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 he wrote these words:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

This passage clearly indicates that our actions must flow from the love in our hearts. That is to say, if our actions do not flow from the love in our hearts, God does not count them as good.

Similarly, Hebrews 11:6 teaches us that the virtue of faith should function as a motive. Listen to its words:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

According to this passage, the virtue of faith must move us to act in faithful ways. Only then will God be pleased with our behavior.

The Scriptures stress Christian virtue because motives are so important to ethical living. And every virtue taught by Scripture functions as a motive within us. So, whenever Scripture emphasizes the importance of Christian virtues, it is also emphasizing the importance of good, virtuous motives.

Now that we have seen the importance of having the right motives when we make ethical decisions, we are ready to explore the motive of faith in greater detail. Why is it critical for us to be motivated by faith? And how does faith motivate us?

MOTIVE OF FAITH

Anyone who knows the Bible realizes that faith is a central concern of both the Old and New Testaments. And the topic of faith has also held a central place in traditional Christian theology. In this lesson we are particularly concerned with looking at faith as a central motive in ethics. We want to explore how faith motivates us to obey God's Word.

Scripture says so much about faith that it would be impossible for us to mention every way faith serves as a motive. So, we will limit our discussion to some of the more common and fundamental ways the motive of faith functions in our decision-making process. First, we will speak of the ways that saving faith serves as a motive. Second, we will discuss the motive of repentance as a primary expression of faith. And third, we will speak of hope as faith directed toward the future. Let's begin with the motive of saving faith, the kind of faith that brings eternal salvation.

SAVING FAITH

For our purposes in this lesson, we can summarize saving faith as:

Assent to the truth of the gospel, and trust in Christ to save us from our sin.

Of course, there is much more that could be said about saving faith. But this definition will help us see how faith functions as a motive for good works.

Scripture talks about saving faith in two main ways. On the one hand, it speaks of faith as the means of initial salvation. On the other hand, it speaks of this same saving faith as an ongoing commitment throughout our Christian lives. Let's look first at saving faith as the means of initial salvation.

Means of Initial Salvation

When we say that saving faith is the means of initial salvation, we mean that it is the tool God uses to apply salvation to us. We might compare faith to a paintbrush that a painter uses to apply paint to a house. The paintbrush does not make the house worthy of being painted, just as faith does not make us worthy of being saved. The paintbrush is merely the tool that the painter uses to get the paint from the bucket to the wall of the house. In the same way, faith is a tool that God uses to apply salvation to sinful individuals. There is nothing in our faith that deserves or earns salvation. On the contrary, Christ's life and death earned salvation, and Christ freely gives us salvation through faith.

Listen to Paul's words in Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand (Romans 5:1-2).

The justification Paul spoke of here, where God pardons sin and declares us to be righteous, took place for Paul and his readers when they had first come to saving faith.

This type of justification happens in the initial stage of our salvation. It is God's gracious act by which he forgives our sin and credits Christ's merit to our account. And it changes our status forever. Before we are justified, we are sinners and enemies of God. But as soon as he saves us, we become his beloved saints. And the tool God uses to justify us is saving faith.

In the context of our initial salvation, saving faith motivates us to repent of our sin and to trust in Christ for our salvation. These good works are the first evidences of our salvation since they can only be motivated by true saving faith.

Besides speaking of saving faith as the means of our initial salvation, the Bible also talks about saving faith as our ongoing commitment to Christ.

Ongoing Commitment

As an ongoing commitment, saving faith consists of continuing assent to the truth of the gospel, and continuing trust in Christ to save us from our sin. It is a constant maintaining of the same faith that was the means of our initial salvation. And this kind of assent and trust necessarily influences everything we believe. They affect the way we

think about ourselves, our families, our jobs, our societies, and everything else in our lives. In this sense, saving faith is a comprehensive worldview that stays relatively stable in our hearts and that influences all our decisions. It is an active faith that underlies and motivates our good works.

Now, we need to be careful not to think that faith is merely a mental act. It is not simply an acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord, and that we are saved through his gospel. As James 2:19 indicates, even demons mentally acknowledge truths about God, but this does not save them.

Instead, saving faith also involves our hearts. It is an inward disposition that causes us to think, speak and act in ways that please God. So, yes, saving faith involves mental acts. But when our faith is genuine, those mental acts flow from our hearts. In this way, saving faith functions as a motive in the life of every believer, enabling and even compelling us to do good works. For example, listen to the way Genesis 15:6 speaks of Abraham's faith:

**Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness
(Genesis 15:6).**

This verse describes Abraham's faith at the time when God first made a covenant with him, and it is traditionally used to provide the definition for saving or justifying faith. To understand why it helps to know that the Hebrew word for "believe" is from the same root as the Hebrew noun for "faith." It also helps to remember that to be justified is to be declared righteous. So, this verse teaches that Abraham was saved, or justified, by means of his faith.

This is why the apostle Paul appealed to Genesis 15:6 to prove the doctrine of justification by faith. He did this in both Romans 4 and Galatians 3. And each time he provided extensive arguments based on Abraham's example, explaining that Abraham's salvation by means of faith is the model for every believer in Christ. And following Paul's lead, Protestant theologians often appeal to Abraham to prove that faith alone is a sufficient means of justification. And while this argument is perfectly true and accurate, we can also take it a step further.

The fact is that Abraham had saving faith long before God made a covenant with him in Genesis 15. According to Hebrews 11:8 and Genesis 12:4, Abraham acted in faith when he left Haran to travel to the Promised Land — long before the justification recorded in Genesis 15.

The covenant ceremony recorded in Genesis 15 took place after Abraham had arrived in the Promised Land, many years after he first came to faith. To be sure, Abraham's faith at this moment was saving, justifying faith. But it was not new faith. It was the same faith that had characterized Abraham throughout his life as a believer. So, when Paul used this event to provide a model for us, he was not just referring to the fact that our initial salvation takes place by means of faith. He was also saying that every believer must maintain saving faith as an ongoing commitment just as Abraham did. As Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20:

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

And listen to Hebrews 10:38-39 where the author quoted the Old Testament and related it to the early church:

“My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (Hebrews 10:38-39).

Those who believe and are saved — that is, those who have saving faith — do not shrink back and are not destroyed. They stay the course in faith.

True saving faith characterizes us throughout our lives. So, if our faith does not remain in us, then it was never truly saving faith. Moreover, true saving faith motivates us to do good works. So, if we are not motivated to do good works, our faith is counterfeit; it is a false faith that cannot save us. As James wrote in James 2:17-18:

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead... I will show you my faith by what I do (James 2:17-18).

Saving faith always manifests itself in good works throughout our Christian lives.

Consider Hebrews 11, sometimes called the “Hall of Faith.” This chapter summarizes the ongoing saving faith of many Old Testament believers and appeals to them as examples for our own faith. Hebrews 11 emphasizes that these people all lived by faith, not just when they first came to faith, but throughout their entire lives. And more to the point, the many good works they performed were motivated by their ongoing faith.

For example, in Hebrews 11:4 we learn that Abel’s saving faith motivated him to offer pleasing sacrifices to God. Abel assented to the truth that God had the right to require whatever sacrifice he wanted, and Abel trusted that God would bless him if he obeyed God’s will. And because of his faith, Abel was willing to sacrifice things that were extremely valuable to him.

In Hebrews 11:7 we are told that Noah’s saving faith motivated him to build the ark, and to preach against the sin he saw in the world. Noah assented to the truth that God would use the ark to spare him and his family from the flood, and he trusted in God to deliver him in this way. This faith motivated Noah to tackle the enormously difficult task of building the ark, and also to preach the gospel to those around him. He endured the ridicule of his neighbors because he was confident that God had spoken truly and that God would spare his neighbors if they would only turn to the Lord in faith.

In Hebrews 11:17-19 we learn that Abraham’s saving faith motivated him to obey God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham assented to God’s right to require Isaac’s death, and he trusted that God would bless both him and Isaac through this act. His faith was so strong that he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead. And in his mercy God ultimately accepted Abraham’s faith without requiring Isaac’s death.

In Hebrews 11:25 we are told that Moses’ faith motivated him to identify with the Israelite slaves, even though he could have enjoyed favor as a member of Pharaoh’s household. Moses gave up a life of luxury and power because he assented to the truth that

all real blessings come from God. And he willingly joined the enslaved nation of Israel because he trusted that God would redeem them from their bondage.

Beyond this, in verses 33-38 we read that the faith of the Old Testament saints motivated them to conquer kingdoms, administer justice, survive threats to their lives, triumph in battle, endure torture, bravely face execution, and endure many other sorts of persecutions and mistreatments. They were able to persevere and to triumph because they had confidence in God's goodness toward them, and they trusted him as their Savior. This assent and trust strengthened them to desire and to pursue God's pleasure above everything else in their lives.

And the same thing is true for us today. We must remain steadfast in our faith throughout our lives. We must constantly assent to the truths that God proclaims in his Word, and we must earnestly trust in his blessings and salvation.

As we have seen in prior lessons, those who lack saving faith — that is, the unbelievers in the world — reject God's truth and refuse to trust him. Because they are enslaved by sin, they deny God's goodness and sovereignty, they spurn the salvation he offers, and they are motivated only to sin.

But when we really believe that God is who he claims to be and trust him in every way, then we should recognize that happiness and fulfillment come only from him. We should see that obedience to his will is the path to these blessings. And in this way, our faith can motivate us to good works as well.

With this understanding of saving faith in mind, we are ready to discuss repentance as a second way the motive of faith functions within the Christian life.

REPENTANCE

In the Bible repentance is a heartfelt aspect of faith whereby we genuinely reject and turn away from our sin. It is more than admitting and believing that we are sinners, and even more than feeling sorry for our sins. Of course, repentance involves these things. But unless we actually turn from our sins and turn to goodness, we haven't really repented.

In Scripture repentance and faith are often two sides of the same coin. Faith is turning to Christ, and repentance is turning away from sin. And these two turnings are the same motion. The main difference between them is that faith is described from the perspective of what we are beginning to embrace, and repentance is described from the perspective of what we are leaving behind. In this process, our actions of repentance are motivated by our feelings of repentance — our penitence, our contrition. And these feelings are expressions of faith. By faith we assent to repentance as an integral part of the gospel, and by faith we trust that God will forgive us when we repent.

Consider, for example, the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius, which is recorded in Acts 10. In that event Peter was sent to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household. And while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon the household proving that they had come to saving faith. Later in Acts 11, Peter reported this event to the church in Jerusalem. And the church's response strongly equated repentance and faith. Listen to the church's response in Acts 11:18:

[The church] praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

Cornelius' conversion was motivated by genuine feelings of repentance. In fact, the connection between saving faith and repentance was so strong that in the church's mind, conversion could rightly be summarized in terms of repentance.

In a similar way, John the Baptist equated the motive of repentance with the motive of faith. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him to be baptized, John exhorted them to do good works in keeping with repentance. In Matthew 3:8 John instructed them with these words:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8).

John's baptism of repentance was intended to have lifelong repercussions. It was intended to get people to turn from their sin and to embrace goodness from that point on. In John's mind, true repentance motivated good works.

And the apostle Paul taught the same principle. As he stood before King Agrippa explaining why he had been imprisoned, Paul summarized the gospel in terms of repentance and good works. Listen to his words in Acts 26:20:

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds (Acts 26:20).

Again, repentance and turning to God are mentioned as two sides of the same coin. When our hearts are truly repentant, our repentance motivates us to turn from our sin and to live in ways that God approves.

There are many memorable examples of repentance in Scripture. For example, Luke 19:8 records the repentance of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. When he came to faith in Christ, he stopped cheating people, gave half his possessions to the poor, and repaid four times the amounts he had stolen from people. He turned from his sin of theft, and turned toward an ongoing life of faith and good works.

And Acts 9 records that when the apostle Paul was converted, he repented of his sins against the church, and became a powerful evangelist, risking his life to preach the gospel and humbly seeking fellowship with those he had previously persecuted. He turned from his sin of persecuting the church and turned toward a life of faithful service to Christ.

And in 2 Samuel 12 we read of David's repentance after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had arranged the death of her husband Uriah to cover up his sin. But David turned from his sin by confessing it and showing great contrition. And he turned toward faith by beginning to live according to God's will, especially by praising God for the forgiveness he had received and also by teaching others to repent as well. He even memorialized his repentance in what is perhaps the greatest psalm of repentance in the Bible, Psalm 51. Listen to what David wrote in Psalm 51:12-14:

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness (Psalm 51:12-14).

In David's life, repentance motivated him to rejoice, to obey God willingly, to teach God's Word to others, and to sing the Lord's praises.

David's example of repentance is particularly important for Christians because David was such a strong believer and model of faith before he sinned. Before David's sin, he had demonstrated his faith in God time and again throughout his life. And God had blessed David's faith by raising him from a humble shepherd to a powerful warrior to the king over the nation of Israel. But seemingly at the height of David's favor with the Lord, after his faith had been proven over and over again, David fell into horrible sin. He became an adulterer and a murderer. And modern believers fall into equally heinous sins as well. Question and answer 82 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* summarizes this biblical teaching quite well. In answer to the question:

Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?

The *Catechism* answers:

No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.

We fall into sin every day. And this means that we have both an obligation and an opportunity to repent every day.

You may be aware that in the year 1517 the German theologian Martin Luther unintentionally started the Protestant Reformation by posting his famous *Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door at Wittenberg. But do you know what the first of his theses was? It was simply this:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Because the Christian life is a life of faith, it must also be a life of repentance. As we journey ahead by trusting in God's promises, we look back from time to time. And when we see how we have offended God and others, repentance motivates us to ask for their forgiveness, and to act differently in the future. Practically speaking, it is sometimes uncomfortable for us to admit and confess our specific sins. But when we trust in God's forgiveness and salvation, and when we desire to please him, it should motivate us to humble ourselves, to turn from our sin, and to pursue the righteousness that characterizes the kingdom of God.

Having considered saving faith and repentance, we are ready now to address hope as a third aspect of the motive of faith.

HOPE

The Bible speaks of hope in different ways. But for our purposes it will help to think of those times that it describes hope as faith directed toward the future aspects of our salvation in Christ.

Scripture teaches that salvation is not completed in this life. We have been justified, and we have received the Holy Spirit. But we have not yet been made perfect. We still wrestle with sin. We still suffer from death and disease, and we still struggle against many problems and corruptions in the world. When we die and go to heaven, we will be freed from these problems. But even then our salvation will not be complete. We will still be waiting for Jesus to return to earth in order to make all things right and new. We will still look forward to our glorified resurrected bodies, and to the new heavens and the new earth.

In the Old Testament, God's people were frequently exhorted to hope in God's future salvation. And following this example, the New Testament commonly refers to our confidence in the future aspects of salvation as the great hope of Christianity. For instance, in Romans 8:23-24 Paul spoke about our hope of future resurrection with these words:

We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:23-24).

Hope is the confident belief that as surely as Jesus gave us his Holy Spirit, he will return to renew the world and to grant us our inheritance in it. And like saving faith, this type of hope is firm and sure.

Hebrews 6 speaks of this hope by relating it to Abraham's belief in God's covenant promises. And it says that our future salvation is based on the promises that were made to Abraham. Listen to Hebrews 6:17-19:

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that ... we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Hebrews 6:17-19).

Our hope is not a tentative or wishful desire. It is steadfast and certain because God has sworn to complete our salvation.

This kind of hope motivates good works in various ways. According to 1 Thessalonians 5:6-10, the helmet of hope motivates alertness and self-control. And by comparing these verses to others that speak about the armor of God, it is clear that one way the helmet of hope helps us control ourselves is by protecting us from demonic

attacks and temptations. So, hope serves as a motive for good works by giving us a reason to resist sin.

As we look forward to the blessings that await us, we know that we will be blessed more greatly if we obey the Lord than if we sin. We also know that the temporary pleasures of sin are not worthy to be compared with the eternal blessings that God has in store for us.

In Colossians 1:5 we also learn that hope in our future salvation motivates us to love more greatly and to have stronger faith. And of course, both love and faith are themselves not only good works, but also motives for good works. So, by motivating faith and love, hope is the source of immeasurable good works.

Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 1:3 teaches that hope increases our endurance, helping us to remain steadfast in our faith, and to perform works that are pleasing to God. But perhaps the most comprehensive summary of hope as a motive can be found in 1 Peter 1:13-15. Listen to what Peter wrote there:

Prepare your minds for action ... set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do (1 Peter 1:13-15).

Hope prepares us to obey and to be holy in every aspect of our lives. It prepares us to endure hardship, just as Jesus himself did. As we read in Hebrews 12:2-3:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Many of us have had the experience of losing hope at one point or another. Maybe we felt that God had abandoned us or were unsure that our faith was true. But whatever the cause, hopelessness often causes us to feel helpless, like nothing we do can change anything. It deprives us of purpose and meaning in life. And it can make even the simplest jobs seem too difficult to attempt.

When we lose hope as Christians, we often stop trying to resist sin. We lose our purpose for enduring the struggles we encounter in life, and we may even despair of life itself. But when our hope is strong, we can be motivated to endure life's greatest challenges, to overcome every obstacle, because we have our eyes fixed on God, who promises to preserve us.

Now that we have seen the importance of motives and have discussed the motive of faith, we are ready to address our third major topic: the motive of love.

MOTIVE OF LOVE

Love is one of the most recognized but least understood concepts in the Christian faith. We can see that love is central to the Bible's teachings. We are exhorted to love the Lord, to love each other, and even to love our enemies. At the same time, most people have very little idea how to fulfill the Bible's commandments to love.

Do you remember how Jesus summarized the teachings of the Old Testament? He said that the greatest commandment of the law is Deuteronomy 6:5, which says that we must love God. And the second greatest commandment is Leviticus 19:18, which requires that we love our neighbors. And then he said that these two laws summarize the entire Old Testament. Listen to his words in Matthew 22:37-40:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus' point was not that the hundreds of other laws in the Old Testament were somehow less important than these two. Instead, these two are the greatest commandments because they include the others, because the others hang on them. They express the general principles that all the other laws explain and apply.

This is the same principle that Paul taught in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14. In fact, love is so foundational to all good works that if it is not among our motives, our works can never be counted good.

So, we know that it is critical for us to love God and neighbors. But what does this kind of love look like, and how should it motivate us? Well, according to Jesus, the way to love God and our neighbors is to live according to the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, rightly interpreted and applied to our situations. Of course, it is not possible for us to explore all the ways the law and the prophets help us understand what love is. So we will offer a definition that summarizes the Bible's teachings on love in terms of three general elements.

We will summarize love as consisting of allegiance, action and affection. These three elements cover most of the Bible's teachings on love, and they overlap in many ways. By considering love from the perspective of each element, we will be able to learn a great deal about the ways love can motivate us to do good works.

In line with our definition of love, we will explore the motive of love by speaking first of allegiance, second of action, and third of affection. Let's begin with love as allegiance that motivates us to do good to God and to our neighbor.

ALLEGIANCE

Our discussion of allegiance will divide into three parts. First, we will speak of the loyalty we owe to God and to others. Second, we will address our life orientation.

And third, we will mention the importance of discovering our responsibility. These are some of the main ways that the Bible speaks about allegiance and motives, so they will give us a good foundation for understanding allegiance as a whole. Let's begin with loyalty as a critical aspect of allegiance.

Loyalty

In many ways loyalty is the cornerstone of the concept of love. As we saw in an earlier lesson, the Old Testament consistently portrays God as the covenant king over his people. He is the suzerain or supreme emperor, and his people are his vassal or servant kingdom. And as in any kingdom, the most basic responsibility of the people is loyalty to the king. But how does this relate to love?

Well, in the ancient Near East (the world of the Old Testament), it was common for the covenant relationship between a suzerain and his vassal state to be described in terms of love. The suzerain's love was expressed largely in the form of covenant loyalty to his people. He gave them protection, preserved justice for them, and met their earthly needs. This was his love toward them. And in response the vassal people were required to be loyal to him. They were to obey his laws, support him through taxes and service, and honor him as their king. This was their love toward him. Similarly, citizens were to love each other by treating their neighbors as fellow countrymen, respecting and caring for them.

In line with this concept of love, covenant kingdoms of the ancient Near East used many metaphors to describe the relationship between the suzerain and his vassals. Frequently, the suzerain was described as a father, while the vassals were described as his children, as in Isaiah 64:8. We also see this relationship described in terms of a husband and wife, as in Jeremiah 31:32. By thinking of their relationship to the king in these terms, the people were able to understand his feelings for them and their obligations to him. And because the citizens of the kingdom were all part of the same family, they were to see and to treat each other as their brothers and sisters. Thinking of these political relationships in terms of family helped the people see that this loving allegiance and loyalty was to be heartfelt. It was to be an inward disposition of favor that motivated the people to honor, respect and obey the king, and to treat their neighbors with true compassion and concern.

A good place to see this idea in action is Deuteronomy 6, where Moses used the concept of love to explain the loyalty and obedience the Israelites were to render to God. Although it would be useful to quote the entire chapter, time will only permit us to highlight some of its statements. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 6:1, 5:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe ... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:1, 5).

In this chapter, love for God is summarized in terms of obedience to God's commands, decrees and laws. And this summary is then followed by several specific ways that Israel was to show their love for God.

For instance, Deuteronomy 6:13-17 highlights loyalty and obedience. Listen to what Moses wrote there:

Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land... Be sure to keep the commands of the Lord your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you (Deuteronomy 6:13-17).

Now, if God's love for us were just like the love that an ordinary father has for his children, we would never expect to hear about his willingness to destroy us if we fail to follow him. But the fact is that God's fatherly love is the love of a king for his people. The metaphor of fatherhood is helpful because it highlights the ways God protects us, provides for us, and cares about us. But fatherhood is still just a metaphor. Behind this metaphor is the fact that God is our king. He really does rule over us. He really is sovereign. We really are bound in covenant with him. And therefore the most basic and important way we can show our love for him is through our earnest covenant loyalty.

And the New Testament confirms this idea in many ways. For instance, Jesus is our Lord and King, and we are to render love to him through loyal obedience, as well as through our loyalty to his church. We cannot turn away from him or reject him. We cannot place other loyalties ahead of our loyalty to him. We cannot reject the obligations he places on us. And we cannot mistreat or abandon the people he loves. To show such disloyalty would be to hate him and to invite his judgment. But if we remain steadfast in our love for him, he will reward us in his kingdom.

Consider Revelation 1:4-6 where John introduced his book in this way:

Grace and peace to you ... from Jesus Christ ... the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! (Revelation 1:4-6).

And as Jesus stated in John 14:15:

If you love me, you will obey what I command (John 14:15).

In God's covenant relationship with us, loyalty is a positive virtue, motivating us to serve our Lord and King, and to honor and care for those who live with us under his rule. And conversely, it is also a negative requirement, forbidding rival alliances to other gods and idols in our lives.

With this understanding of loyalty in mind, we are ready to speak of the way our love for God requires us to adopt a new orientation to life.

Orientation

The allegiance we owe to God touches every area of our lives. There is no aspect of life that takes place outside his kingdom or beyond his sovereign rule. For this reason, our lives must be comprehensively oriented around him. God and his kingdom must be our highest priorities, the focus of our desires, and the center of our worldview. We must be inwardly disposed to work for the benefit of God and his people in everything that we think, say, and do.

As we have seen, Deuteronomy 6:5, the first great commandment, summarizes the human person in terms of heart, soul and strength. These terms are not meant to represent the different portions of our being, as if we could be divided into three or four distinct parts. Rather, each one speaks of the whole person. In the Hebrew vocabulary, our heart is not just our emotions, but the center of our entire being, including our mind, our conscience, and every other aspect of our character. Similarly, our soul is our entire self, including both our conscious mind and our subconscious desires. And the word for “strength” in Deuteronomy does not refer to our bodies or actions so much as it refers to the intensity of our love for God, and to our determination to use all our abilities to pursue that love. So, by each of these terms, Scripture exhorts us to be totally committed to God with the whole of our being.

And by coupling this great commandment with the command to love our neighbors, Jesus indicated that we are to have the same type of love for other people and especially for our fellow citizens in God’s kingdom. These commitments to God and his people should be our primary orientation in life. They should be the most fundamental commitments of our inward dispositions.

Of course, the greatest example of the proper orientation in life is Jesus. Jesus oriented his entire life around God and around the people he came to save. This orientation motivated him to obey God perfectly in all things and to sacrifice himself willingly for the people he loved. And our allegiance to God and to our neighbors should lead us to have the same orientation in our lives. It should even motivate us to make the same kinds of sacrifices that Jesus made. As we read in 1 John 3:16:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).

When we make God the center of our lives, it affects all our decisions, from our random thoughts, to the way we treat other people, to the person we choose to marry. When we fail to orient our lives around God, we end up centering our lives around other priorities such as money, or power, or influence, or recreation, or charismatic individuals. And these orientations also influence our behavior, but they do it in a way that furthers a different agenda than the one God has prescribed in his Word. But when we orient our lives around God and his people, we pursue the agenda of his kingdom, and are motivated to live in ways that please him.

Having addressed the matters of loyalty and orientation, we are ready to consider the way that our love for God and for our neighbors should motivate us to discover our responsibility before the Lord in every area of life.

Responsibility

Love is an orientation of obedience and service to God. So, it should dispose us to keep all of God's commandments. But how exactly can we do this? Is it simply a matter of counting up all the statutes and requirements in the law and then doing the things they explicitly list? Or should we serve the Lord in ways that go beyond the examples specifically mentioned in Scripture? Well, the answer is that our loving allegiance to God should motivate us to seek out additional ways that we are responsible to him.

To explain what we mean, let's look at the Ten Commandments. As they are listed in Exodus 20:3-17, the commandments are:

- You shall have no other gods before me.
- You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet.

Eight of these commandments specifically forbid certain behaviors, and do not explicitly mention anything that we must actively do. If we imagined that all our responsibilities were explicitly mentioned in Scripture, we would conclude that there are only two things we must actively pursue: Sabbath keeping, and honoring our parents. Similarly, we would conclude that the commandment against murder prohibits murder but not things like unrighteous anger. But we would be wrong. The fact is that the Bible regularly applies these commandments to every area of our lives.

As just one example, consider Matthew 5:21-22 where Jesus presented the following teaching:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21-22).

Here Jesus referred to what was said to the people, that is, what was taught to them by some Jewish interpreters of Scripture.

If we don't seek our responsibilities before God, it is very easy to develop the mindset that God's Word only binds a very small part of our lives, that the allegiance we owe him is extremely limited. We can make the mistake of thinking that because our circumstances are different from those in Scripture, God's requirements don't apply to us. This leaves us ignorant of our responsibilities so that we cannot guard ourselves against sin.

But when we properly seek our responsibilities before God, understanding that we are obligated to him in every area of our life, we are in a better position to make decisions that he approves. Our love for God should make us dissatisfied with a limited knowledge of his requirements and of our neighbors' needs. It should motivate us to discover all our responsibilities toward our great King and his people so that we can fulfill our duty in the best possible way.

Having spoken of allegiance, we should turn to the topic of action, which describes how we should behave toward God and toward each other.

ACTION

Our discussion of action will divide into two parts. Specifically, we will talk about the ways that God's actions serve as models for our own behavior. On the one hand, we will look at God's actions of atoning grace. And on the other hand, we will look at his actions of common grace. Let's begin with the way God's atoning grace serves as a model for our actions.

Atoning Grace

As we have said throughout this series, God's character is our ultimate ethical standard. And because God always acts according to his character, all his actions are perfect expressions of his character.

This is why Scripture commonly exhorts us to pattern both our character and our actions after God's, especially with regard to his rescue and redemption of those he loves. For instance, in Deuteronomy 5:13-15 the Lord required all Israel to observe the Sabbath. Masters, servants, sojourners and even animals were given this day off in imitation of the rest from labor that God brought to the entire nation when he redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Similarly, in Matthew 18:23-35 Jesus taught that we are to imitate God's forgiveness. We are to forgive those who sin against us because God has forgiven us for sinning against him. And just like God's forgiveness of us, our forgiveness of others is to be genuine and heartfelt, motivated by true compassion for them.

More generally, Scripture teaches that we should love each other in imitation of the love that God has shown for us. And of course, the greatest example of this is Christ, who died for our sins. Listen to John's teaching in 1 John 4:9-11:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:9-11).

As sinners, we were offensive to God. We hated him. We were set against him as his enemies. We deserved punishment, not mercy. Even so, God was willing to sacrifice his Son, whom he loved above all else in order to save us. And following his example, we should be willing to suffer on behalf of others.

Of course, we can never make an atoning sacrifice on behalf of someone else — and Scripture doesn't ask us to. But it does ask us to show the same kind of love for others that God showed to us in the atonement. We would willingly make these sacrifices for our own children because we value their lives more than our own. And God asks us to imitate his grace by placing the same value on his children too. As John wrote in 1 John 3:16-18:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

When we fail to imitate God's atoning grace, it is easy for our so-called "love" to consist merely of lip service. For instance, it is easy for us to think that the poor deserve their poverty or that it is someone else's responsibility to take care of them. It is easy for us to place our own interests above the interests of others and to prefer comfort and ease to the hard work of helping others.

But God's gracious example obligates us to give up our money and possessions, and even our lives, to protect and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. It teaches us to love them wholeheartedly so that we are motivated to sacrifice, to suffer, and even to die for them.

With this understanding of God's atoning grace in mind, we are ready to talk about the way his common grace provides an example for us to follow.

Common Grace

Common grace is a technical term in theology that refers to God's kindness to those who will never be saved. For those of us who will ultimately receive salvation, God's grace always works toward our redemption. But God also extends non-redemptive kindness, or "common grace," to those who will never receive salvation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus referred to God's common grace as an expression of his love for all humanity. To be sure, God's general love for humanity is not nearly as great as his love for believers. Nevertheless, it is true and genuine, and it

provides a model that we are to imitate. In Matthew 5:44-48 Jesus gave the following teaching on common grace:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).

As Jesus taught, God's perfection includes his love for evil people, even for those who will never come to faith in Christ. And God expresses this love in many ways, such as through sunshine and rain. God is kind to all people, providing stability and productivity for them in nature, and allowing them to thrive in this life. This is not to say that God is always kind — he is not. Sometimes he sends judgment against the wicked. But generally, he shows forbearance and generosity, even to his enemies.

And because we love God, we should also love the people he loves. Following God's example, our love should motivate us to be good and kind to all people, even if they hate and persecute us. For instance, in Exodus 23:4-5 God's law requires us to protect our enemy's goods. Listen to what it says:

If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it (Exodus 23:4-5).

These instructions appear in a context that speaks of justice. The idea is that we should preserve justice for all people, even if they hate us.

But Jesus did not simply teach us to preserve justice for our enemies; he taught us to love them. We should preserve justice for them because we honestly want them to receive the benefits and protection of justice, and because we love the God who is the standard of justice.

It is easy not to have this kind of love for our enemies. At best, we usually prefer to ignore their needs. And at worst, we are motivated to take vengeance against them and to rejoice when they suffer injustices. But these are not the attitudes that characterize God; they are not the motives he has modeled for us. When we do these things, we are thinking in selfish ways, seeking to please ourselves. We are following the examples of the sinful world and the devil, not of the Lord of mercy and righteousness.

Think about an argument you have had with someone you love. Maybe it was a parent or a child, a spouse, or a close friend. Sometimes these arguments produce anger and hard feelings. But most of the time, our anger does not overshadow our love for these people. Even in our anger, we remain committed to them. We still love them. And we are still unwilling to see them treated unfairly.

Well, in many respects, this is the way God wants us to feel about our enemies. We should have genuine concern for their well-being. And this genuine concern should manifest itself in action. It should motivate us to be kind to them, to pray for them, to protect them, and to provide for them when they are in need.

Now, we need to offer at least one qualification to the way we imitate God's common grace. Specifically, we need to mention that this type of love does not preclude a desire for justice. God sometimes withholds his kindness in order to execute judgment against the wicked. And God's judgments are always good and right. Moreover, Scripture teaches that justice is an important aspect of love. As we read in Psalm 33:5:

The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love (Psalm 33:5).

A desire for justice against those who have wronged us is not incompatible with love. In fact, ideally, when we truly imitate God's common grace, our desire for justice, our love for God, our love for our neighbors, and our love for our enemies are all remarkably similar. And the reason is this: God, who is justice, often uses his judgments as a corrective to drive sinners to repentance and salvation. For example, in Zechariah 14:16, God's judgment against the nations leads to repentance:

Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 14:16).

Even when we desire God's justice, our ultimate motive should be love. We should hope that God's justice will bring about the repentance that leads to life.

God's love is complex. If we oversimplify it, we may wrongly conclude that we cannot love our neighbors at the same time that we desire justice against the wicked, or that we cannot love them at the same time that we hate the evil we see in the world. But Scripture teaches that God's love includes both a desire for justice and a hatred of evil. So, the solution for us as Christians is to make sure that our desires for justice and our hatred of evil are part and parcel with our love for all humanity. When these feelings are divorced from love, they are sinful. But when they are expressions of love, they are righteous, and they motivate us to think, to speak and to act in ways that God approves.

Having spoken of allegiance and action, we are ready to turn to affection, which is the most explicitly emotional aspect of love.

AFFECTION

Christian teachers sometimes speak of biblical love as if it consisted entirely of actions and thoughts. For example, some argue that the Bible exhorts us to love in active ways and that it doesn't matter how we feel emotionally. They say love for God consists of outwardly obeying God's commandments, doing things like going to church, saying our prayers, reading the Bible, and having our quiet times. And love for neighbor consists of restraining our anger, being polite, refraining from boasting, and the like. But the Bible gives us a very different perspective on the matter. Recall the words of 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

The good works Paul described here are morally good when they are motivated by heartfelt affection. But when they are not, they are worthless. Without love, the spiritual gift of tongues becomes a clanging cymbal. The one who has prophecy, knowledge and faith is nothing. And the one who gives up all his possessions and even his life gains nothing. Love is a critical emotional dimension of every action we can perform. Without it, nothing we do can be considered good.

Consider also Matthew 15:7-9 where Jesus gave this sharp criticism:

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain” (Matthew 15:7-9).

Jesus’ point was simple — to honor and worship God without affection is hypocrisy. Whether our actions are directed toward other people or toward God, they must be motivated by a genuine feeling of affection.

There are many different affections or emotions that we might discuss as aspects of love that motivate good works, but time will only allow us to mention two. First, we will speak of gratefulness to God. And second, we will consider fear of God. Let’s begin with the way gratefulness motivates us to please the Lord and to care for our neighbors.

Gratefulness

In Scripture, gratefulness should be our normal response to God’s grace and benevolence, and it should motivate us to obey him. For example, the Ten Commandments are introduced by a statement of God’s benevolence. This benevolence is supposed to make us grateful so that we want to keep the commandments that follow. Listen to the way Exodus 20:2 introduces the Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

At the time that God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, their Exodus from Egypt was the greatest event of redemption that had ever occurred. It was the Old Testament equivalent of Christ’s sacrifice in the New Testament — the event that biblical writers constantly mentioned in order to inspire gratefulness in their readers.

Immediately after this introduction to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, we find the Ten Commandments themselves. As many theologians have noted throughout

the centuries, these commandments are set into two groups: first, laws summarizing what it means to love God; and second, laws summarizing what it means to love our neighbors.

So, in the Ten Commandments, we find that heartfelt gratefulness to God is intended to be the motive that inspires us to allegiance, action, and further affection, both toward God as our king and toward our fellow human beings as his beloved creatures and children.

And the New Testament teaches the same principle. As we have said, it tends to appeal more regularly to Christ's sacrifice as the basis of our gratefulness, but the concept is the same: God's benevolence deserves our love and obedience. As John stated in 1 John 4:19:

We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

And as Paul wrote in Colossians 3:17:

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

Our thankfulness for the gift of his Son should motivate us to love our Lord and to express this love through good works done in his name and for his glory.

It's not hard to understand how gratefulness functions as a motive. Most of us have many reasons to be grateful. We may be grateful to our parents for the way they have cared for us, or to particular teachers for the way they have mentored us. We are grateful when people rescue us from danger or distress. And in all these cases, our response is often to thank the people who helped us and even to repay them in some way if possible.

On the other hand, it should also be easy to think of people in our lives who have been ungrateful, people who have not appreciated the good things that others have done for them. When we are ungrateful, we typically have no desire to please those who help us. Instead, we tend to receive their help as if it were our just reward, and we resent them if they do not perform as we expect. Far from motivating us to love them, ungratefulness tends to make us despise others.

Clearly, as Christians, our gratefulness to God should motivate us to obey him, and to help those he loves. We can never repay God for the gift of Christ, so the good works we do are not a form of repayment to him. They are simply the loving responses of those who appreciate what God has done. Those who are truly grateful for what God has done could never express that gratitude by bowing to false gods, or by taking his name in vain, or by doing anything else that displeases him. We have received the greatest gift imaginable. How could we not give ourselves wholeheartedly to our covenant Lord?

Having seen how gratefulness should motivate us to good works, we can now address the fear of God that is part of our love for him and that motivates our good works.

Fear

In the modern church, Christians often don't talk about fearing God. And perhaps the reason is that the concept is so misunderstood. When modern Christians think about fear, we usually associate it with terror and fright. We fear things that can harm us, things that intend evil against us. And without a doubt the Bible often uses the word "fear" this way. But this kind of fear of God has no part in the life of a believer. As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:17-18:

Love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love (1 John 4:17-18 NASB).

Love is perfected in Christians, and this perfect love casts out fear because God will never harm us. Therefore, this is not the kind of fear that Scripture intends when it speaks of the fear of God in a positive way. The kind of fear we have in mind is described by Moses in Deuteronomy 10:12-13. Listen to what he wrote there.

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

While there are slightly different nuances between the obligations Moses listed here, they are all essentially the same thing. Fearing, walking, loving, serving, observing — they all refer to rendering wholehearted, loyal, active obedience to God and his commands.

For the sake of simplicity, we can define the fear of God as "awe, reverence and honor for God that produces adoration, love and worship for God." In some measure, this kind of fear characterizes every true believer in Christ. For instance, in Isaiah 33:5-6 we read this exhortation:

The Lord ... will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure (Isaiah 33:5-6).

Notice that far from being an expression of terror, reverential fear is associated with confidence in God as our sure foundation and salvation.

In Isaiah 11:2-3, we find that this fear also characterizes the Messiah. Listen to the prophet's words:

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of

knowledge and of the fear of the Lord — and he will delight in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2-3).

Reverential fear is not a cowering, threatened response to God. On the contrary, it is a delight. Moreover, as we read in Acts 9:31, the same fear characterized the early church. Listen to its account:

The church ... enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31).

Once again, fear is associated with feelings like peace, strength and encouragement, and not with terror or alarm.

Reverential fear of God is the sense of living in his constant presence. It is the understanding of who and what God is, and of what he requires of us. And as such, it is both an aspect of love and a motive to perform good works. It is an aspect of love because it is an affirming and appreciative response to God's grandeur and goodness; it is a strong affection and admiration for his character. And it motivates us to good works through our desire to honor and glorify the one we love.

When we lack this perspective, it is easy to become apathetic and lazy about Christian ethics. It is easy to think that God is far away and that we don't need to worry too much about the obligations he places on our lives. Instead of seeking God's kingdom, we focus only on the earthly world. And as a result, we feel no compulsion to regulate our lives according to God's revealed will.

But when we have a proper reverential fear for God, it motivates us to please him in many ways. Scripture mentions the results of this motive in many places. But we find the greatest concentration of them in the Old Testament wisdom literature. For example, the book of Proverbs teaches us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge in 1:7, the beginning of wisdom in 9:10, and a fountain of life in 14:27. It adds length to life according to 10:27. It helps us avoid evil in 16:6. And it brings wealth and honor and life in 22:4. All these and many other good results flow from the fear of God. Listen to the way Ecclesiastes 12:13 summarizes true wisdom and ethics:

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

The fear of God should and does motivate us to think, speak and act in ways that please our God and King. It should motivate us to keep his commandments, and to do good to the creatures that he loves.

So, we see that love functions as a motive for good works in many ways. In allegiance, it motivates us to fulfill our duty to God and to our neighbors. In action, it motivates us to do what glorifies God and benefits our neighbors. And in affection, it motivates us to please our beloved Lord by serving him and caring for our neighbors.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on intending good, our discussion of the existential perspective has focused on the concept of motive. We began by looking at the importance of motives, seeing the role motives play in the process of making biblical decisions. Next, we focused on two very important motives that are part of every good decision: the motive of faith, both in our initial salvation and in our ongoing Christian lives; and the motive of love, which includes allegiance, action and affection.

Christians are faced with many, many ethical decisions every day. In many cases, it is hard enough to figure out what our duty is and what the facts are, let alone to be introspective about our own persons. Even so, if our decisions are to be truly biblical, we have to make the effort to explore our intentions. We have to make sure that everything we do really is motivated by our faith in God and by our love for God and neighbor. When we keep our intentions clearly in view, we will be better prepared to make decisions that honor and glorify our Lord.

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Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
TEN

THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE:
CHOOSING GOOD



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Ten

The Existential Perspective: Choosing Good

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE

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

EXPERIENCE

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

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

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

Physical

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mental

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

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

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

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

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

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

IMAGINATION

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

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

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

Creativity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time

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

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

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

Distance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ASSESSING KNOWLEDGE

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

REASON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONSCIENCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EMOTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

APPLYING KNOWLEDGE

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

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

HEART

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

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

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

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

Commitments

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Desires

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WILL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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