

BIBLICAL ETHICS

WEEK 1: WHAT ARE BIBLICAL ETHICS?

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- The challenge which is placed upon every Christian is to live as Christ in every area of their life during every moment of their life.
- **1 Peter 1:14-16** “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, **be holy yourselves also in all your behavior**; because it is written, ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy.’”
- The purpose of this six-week class is to not only define ethics and the importance of finding our ethics from the Bible, but also how Christians should be thinking and acting in this age.
- Our world is a marketplace of ideas. And whether the ideas we face are religious, political, economic, or social, decisions about those ideas are unavoidable. We have to make choices. When it comes to making choices, we have entered the realm of “ethics.”¹
- We are all ethicists. Each day of our lives we face decisions about how we should live. As we do, we realize that many of the choices we make are not devoid of significance. Rather, we know that somehow and in some way, they do matter. In short, we are continually making decisions that are ethical in nature.²
- Since we do make decisions on a regular and continual basis, we must have a fundamental understanding of what biblical ethics are and how we can rightly apply them.
- **2 Peter 3:17** “You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, **be on your guard** so that you are not carried away by the error of *unprincipled men* and fall from your own steadfastness.”
 - Notice how Peter gives the command to *be on your guard*. The purpose of this command is so that we would not be passively *carried away*.
 - Our minds are constantly being fought over by the world for control. We must be able to sift out what does not need to be there and hold fast to what is good.
- Francis Shaeffer, in his groundbreaking book *How Should We Then Live?* said, “People have presuppositions, and they will live more consistently on the basis of those presuppositions than even they themselves may realize.”

¹ David Burggraff

² Ibid.

- This was during a time in the late 1970's when words like *worldview* and *truth claims* were not in the common language of the church.
- Schaeffer was also right that the promises of personal peace and affluence were the greatest threats to evangelical faithfulness.³
- In other words, how Christians respond to what is going on around them in culture is going to be a direct reflection of their understanding of biblical ethics.
- By way of introduction, here are some various rudimentary ethical systems that we are going to look at and that you may already be familiar with.
- **When in Rome, do as the Romans do:** Cultural Relativism
- **I couldn't help myself:** Behaviorism
- **Be good:** Virtue Ethics
- **Look out for number one:** Ethical Egoism
- **The greatest good for the greatest number:** Utilitarianism
- **It's your duty:** Kantian Ethics
- **All you need is love:** Situation Ethics
- **Do whatever comes naturally:** Natural Law Ethics
- **God said it, I believe it, that settles it:** Divine Command Theory

INTRODUCTION TO THIS CLASS

- Today, all we want to do is properly define ethics and show how each person, regardless of their religious views, makes decisions based upon their ethical presupposition.
- For the purpose of this class, we are not going to distinguish between biblical ethics and Christian ethics. Though one can make a case that not all who call themselves Christians believe in the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Bible.

IS MORALITY IMPRINTED ON EVERY PERSON?

- Are Christians the only people who are able to live a morally sound life? Do other people, who are not saved, understand morality...even biblical morality?
- Most people will put together having a good life with living a morally sound life.
- Most people will also tell you what they do not do wrong (or what they consider wrong) in order to tell you they have a good life. (I am not a murderer, I don't cheat on my taxes, etc.)

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/schaeffers-how-should-we-now-then-live-40-years-later/>

- Why is that? Why do people put these two things together...a good life means a moral life?
- From a Christian worldview, *morality is built into the fabric of the universe and is built into our constitution as human beings.*⁴
 - In other words, as Christians, we believe that each person has the capacity to do right and wrong simply because they are created in the image of God.
 - While an evolutionist may believe that man has an innate ability to tell the difference between right and wrong, they do not see it as being from God but from a place of evolution.
 - Both atheists and people belonging to a wide range of faiths make the same moral judgments, Dr. Hauser writes, implying “that the system that unconsciously generates moral judgments is immune to religious doctrine.”⁵
 - What is interesting is that we have the same facts and can see the same outcomes...yet we start from a very different place.
- **Romans 2:14-15** “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law *written in their hearts, their conscience* bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them...”
- The Bible says that all men, regardless of their eternal destination, have God’s law written on their hearts.
- How do we know this? A pirate has no problem stealing from someone...but when you try to steal from that same pirate, he gets angry.
 - Thus showing that he knows that stealing is wrong, but it only applies when he is being robbed.
- Think of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ate the fruit that they were not supposed to. What did they do when God came to them after that?
- **Genesis 3:8** “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife *hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God* among the trees of the garden.”
- Adam and Eve went from walking with God to fearing and hiding from God. Why? Who told them that they were now in a different relationship with God?
- It is built into mankind what right and wrong is and is not.
- This means that God reveals what He desires to mankind both internally, in the heart/mind, and externally, He has spoken (Heb 1:1-2).
- Overall, one would be hard pressed to find someone who would want to live in a society where there are no morals at all.

⁴ Scott Rae *Introducing Christian Ethics*, 9.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/31/health/psychology/31book.html>

- We may disagree about the details of morality, but we are clear on the connection between morality and a good society.⁶
- I think that Rae's point is one that we often miss as Christians. We tend to think that people want to live where *anything goes*. I don't think that's true at all. I think most people want to live where they get to dictate what is good and what is evil.
- Most people want a high moral ethic for what they consider *big sins*, like murder, stealing, etc. But then for the *minor sins*, there should be some flexibility.
- This is where the biblical ethics comes in and the life of the Christian which does not distinguish between big and minor sins.
- The Christian does not seek to have their own desires as the standard for ethical living but rather they desire to have God's holy standard for their own course of life.

BRIEF EXCURSES ON THEONOMY

- What is theonomy? Two Greek words, *theos* which means God and *nomos* which means law. Essentially, it means that those who are theonomists believe that our society should be governed by God's law.
- Many faithful Christians today sense that the world has been turned upside down. Basic social values that once seemed immovable appear to be collapsing, particularly sexual ethics. Secular and Christian pundits alike are sounding alarms about the present state of American culture and civil order.⁷
- Theonomists teach that the true mission of the church can be seen in the mandate God gave to Adam in the garden to take dominion over the earth and subdue it. Though Adam sinned and brought the curse upon the earth, Christ came to save his people, which includes enabling us to accomplish the original mandate given to Adam.⁸
- This is an important point to grasp. It means the church has not fully accomplished its mission by preaching the Lord Jesus, his law, and his gospel to every tribe and tongue for the conversion of souls and the building up of churches. Rather, the church must also work for transforming the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of our Lord and Christ. It does this by teaching the nations God's law and working to implement it. They also believe the church will assert its dominion, promised by the gospel, through the masculine leadership of godly men in their homes, churches, and societies.⁹
- We are not theonomists. When we speak of biblical ethics, we are not saying that we need to put God's law in place over all the nations so that they will live according to what the Bible says.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ <https://www.9marks.org/article/theonomy-primer-what-is-it-and-how-does-it-work/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

- We firmly and unapologetically believe that the only hope for any person is the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they would be saved from their sin **and only then** are they able to live according to God’s commands.
- Biblical ethics can **only be truly followed by born again believers**. While the unsaved world can act in accordance with the law on the hearts, it has been tainted by sin and they cannot truly know it.
- **1 Corinthians 2:14** “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”
- While all Christians should take advantage of the rights and privileges we have to vote, peacefully assemble, and write our elected officials, our hope is not that the church would usher in God’s Kingdom.¹⁰
- Our only hope is in the gospel and then those people who have been born again are now indwelt by the Spirit will submit to the Spirit and live according to God’s righteous standards.
- We cannot reform the flesh, making pagans hold dear to biblical standards.

WHAT ARE ETHICS? BIBLICAL ETHICS?

- What is ethics? General ethics is that discipline or branch of philosophy which seeks to determine what ought to be the universal moral character and conduct of mankind. Viewed from the Christian perspective, we would answer, “Ethics is the study of how humans ought to live as informed by the Bible and Christian convictions.”¹¹
- Ethics and morality:
 - Some people differentiate between ethics and morality (or morals). They see ethics as more theoretical or general – hence the study of the right and the good – and morality as more specific and practical, that is, the practice or living out of what one believes to be right and good. Hence morality involves the actual living out of one’s beliefs that such things as lying and murder are wrong, whereas ethics entails the study of why it is that these practices are immoral. Most people tend to use the words somewhat interchangeably.¹²
- Important to note that ethics is very different than the normal study of human behavior (like either sociology or anthropology).¹³
 - Sociology and anthropology, as social and behavioral sciences, **describe human behaviors** and the functioning of social institutions, **trying to explain them causally in the light of generalized theories about human and social behavior**. For many centuries these disciplines along with

¹⁰ This is postmillennialism. At its root, it is unbiblical and simply has not exegetical weight.

¹¹ David Burggraff

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

political science and economics were regarded as branches of philosophy, extensions of ethical theory.

- But over the past century, in coming to function as empirical sciences, their interest in moral problems has focused increasingly on the causes of particular problems and on the social consequences. **While ethical discussion and moral action are deeply indebted to them for this, ethics as such is interested less in what people in fact do than in what they ought to do**, less in what their values presently are and more in what their values ought to be. In that it addresses the truth of our moral beliefs, it is a “normative” discipline.
- What this means, as we study ethics, our goal is not to look at what people are doing. We are not looking at our culture and critiquing them for their actions.
- Rather, we are looking at various sources to find what we are to believe and then we are living according to that belief.
- For example, from our list of ethical systems above, take **Do whatever comes naturally** for example.
 - Natural law, in its simplest form, refers to a type of moral theory that asserts the existence of objective, universal moral laws that we can decipher through plain reason and logic.
 - Human dignity, do not steal, do not murder, one can defend themselves, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These all fall under the Natural Law Moral Theory.
 - It is interesting that while the claim is these have come from man’s own reason, some of these are found in the Bible. Thus, showing that God’s law *is* in fact written on the hearts of all mankind.
- Essentially, man has been trying to figure out how they are to live, since the beginning of time.
- How we live shows what ethical system we hold onto.

What are biblical ethics?¹⁴

- Biblical ethics concentrates primarily upon the ends or purposes of life as defined or implied by the Word of God.
- The Christian ethical system distinct from other systems.
- Biblical ethics is built on theistic realism (i.e., there is a God, and He has spoken).
 - **Ethics always involves the question of authority.** Biblical ethics is theocentric, as opposed to secular or philosophical ethics which tend to be anthropocentric.
 - For the secularist, man is the norm – What do men do? For the Christian – What is God’s character? What does God want? (I Pet. 1:14-16; 2:21).

¹⁴ Burggraff

- Biblical ethics affirms the existence of moral absolutes.
 - A moral absolute means that there are universal ethical standards which apply to actions regardless of their particular context.
 - There are things which must always be done or not done, no matter what.
- Biblical ethics is obligatory (“deontological” – from deon, meaning “one’s duty”).
 - There are which must be done because God has said they are to be done.
 - If we are born again, then our duty is to follow what God has said.
- Biblical ethics is perfectly modeled by Jesus Christ – our example of a life rightly-lived.
 - Jesus always did what was right in every situation, regardless of the consequences.
- Biblical ethics recognizes and participates in God’s moral order.
- Biblical ethics affirms that immorality stems from the human will and not from ignorance or social conditions. Evil comes from within man (sin nature), not from without.
 - This is probably the greatest separation between biblical ethics and every other ethical system.
 - Biblical ethics starts with the understanding or firm belief that man is immoral because of what is inside of him.
 - Man is not evil because of his environment nor because of his upbringing. We would certainly see those things as influential but never causative.
- Christians do not claim that the Bible is exhaustive. It is silent about many things, including many moral problems we face today – problems within bio- and medical ethics, for example, problems about responsibility to unborn generations and about population control. Someone might say that we should draw our conclusions on such matters from other things the Bible says, perhaps from more general principles. But then we have invoked a structure of ethical thought which distinguishes general principles from more specific matters, and which employs modes of moral reasoning. This is what ethical theory is about.¹⁵
- At times we are confronted with moral dilemmas in which every available option is morally undesirable, and a decision cannot be avoided or postponed. Suppose that in Nazi-occupied Holland you are hiding Jews in your attic and the Gestapo comes searching for them. Do you lie to save innocent lives, or do you forfeit innocent lives to save lying? Whatever you do will violate some moral rule or another. How then do you choose, and to what extent are you blameworthy? Ethics addresses such questions about moral choices and exceptions to moral rules, and about the extent of moral responsibility.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

SOURCES FOR ETHICS

- The teachings of Scripture are the final court of appeal in ethics. Human reason, church tradition, and the natural and social sciences *may aid moral reflection*, but divine revelation, found in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, constitutes the “bottom line” of the decision -making process. Informed ethical reflection will carefully weigh the various words of men, both past and present, but the Word of God must cast the deciding vote. Evangelicals believe that the canonical Scriptures are the very Word of God, the only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice, and consequently are the highest authority for both doctrine and morals.¹⁷
- Where do biblical ethics come from?¹⁸
 - This may seem like an obvious question, but we have to start with the basics.
 - This *can* be the defining difference between those who hold to biblical ethics and those who hold to Christian ethics. The source of your ethics.
- God’s character is good. Since man is created in God’s image, we have to start with God.
 - **Psalm 119:68** “You are good and do good; Teach me Your statutes.”
- God approves of creatures who conform to His moral character. We are commanded to be like God.
 - **Matthew 5:48** “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
 - **Colossians 3:9-10** “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.”
 - Our new self is becoming more like God therefore we should be imitating God’s character more and more.
- Our morality is grounded and rooted in God’s character since we are His. Because God cannot command anything contrary to His character, all in which He commands is good.
- The only way we can truly learn what God considers to be right and wrong is by going to the Bible.
 - Man knows the basics of right and wrong on his own because he is created in God’s image, but to understand the *why*, one must go to the Bible.
- If we go to the Bible, it is not only our source but also our authority.
- One of the reasons we have the Bible is for the God to teach us how to live.¹⁹

¹⁷ John Jefferson Davis (*Evangelical Ethics*), 15.

¹⁸ Referenced from Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*, 69-71.

¹⁹ There are other reasons, the way of salvation, showing redemptive history, how to enjoy His blessings, etc.

- **Psalm 1:1-2** “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.”
- **1 Thessalonians 4:1** “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.”

The Bible’s authority is higher than all other authorities for ethics.

- **Tradition and church history** are certainly helpful, but we do not look to them for authority. We should look to see how they handled certain circumstances and how they engaged their culture. But, ultimately we need to know what the Bible says.
- **Human reason** is one of the greatest enemies of biblical authority. Our reason is certainly a useful and helpful tool, but it can never usurp what the Bible says.
- We must be very careful so that we are not reasoning something that we think to be right when in fact it goes against what the Bible has to say.
- **Experience** is also another dangerous authority that people look to when making ethical decisions. Once again, reflection upon our experience is helpful, but it is not ultimate.
 - Our experiences are never quite how we have remembered, and they are usually based upon subjective feelings. We should never look to our feelings or to subjective impressions to know what we are supposed to do in any circumstance.
- **Expected results** of a certain event should not be our authority for doing something.
 - In other words, while our decisions should take into consideration what is going to happen, it is not the ultimate reason for why we do something.

NEXT WEEK

- We will have one more week talking about the basics of ethics and normative practices in our culture.
- Then we are going to start talking about how we apply these things in our own thinking.