

BIBLICAL ETHICS

WEEK 2: MAJOR ETHICAL THEORIES AND ETHICAL NORMS

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.

¹ David Burggraff

² Ibid.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CLASS

- Today, we are going to look at some of the major ethical theories and ethical norms which exist in our culture today.
- I believe that when we know how the world is thinking, we are better able to understand why they are making the decisions they are.
- Ultimately, it is a worldview problem. We all have the same “evidence,” but it is how we choose to interpret that evidence which really makes the difference.

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK³

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.

MAJOR ETHICAL THEORIES⁴

- Every day we make choices. **On what basis are those choices made? What makes our choices good and bad choices bad (i.e., the criteria for good and bad actions)?**

³ David Burggraff

⁴ Ibid.

- There are two major primary categories; consequentialist and deontological ethical theories, to which even a third category is recognized.
- **Teleological (consequentialist) theories**
- What is morally good or bad, right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden is determined by the value produced when the act is done. If the deed generates more non-moral good than evil, the act is considered morally good. Consequences (results) or the goal (teleos) of an action, determine which acts are good and which are evil. Teleological thinker's main interest is what people through a given action (examples: to kill someone in war may not be murder, that not every inquirer has the right to a truthful answer, etc.).
- **Deontological (non-consequentialist) theories**
- The deontological approach, the term derived from the Greek deon, meaning "what is due," asks only about the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of an act. Our duty is to do that act which is intrinsically right.
- **Personalistic (personal) theories**
- Ethicists who stress the impact of a given action or policy on people, making that their primary criterion of good or evil, are labeled *personalistic*. **For them duty and ends can be important, but the key is whether people are hurt or helped, whether they grow closer (achieve friendship or community) or are pushed further apart.**
- **Mixed theory**
- From benevolence stems principles such as the principle of utility, the principle of not injuring anyone, and the principle of not interfering with another's liberty. From justice follows principles such as equality before the law. This theory is deontological in that it consults rules; and teleological by telling which rules to live by according to which rules best fit utility and justice.

ETHICAL NORMS

- When most people think of ethics (or morals), they think of rules for distinguishing between right and wrong, such as the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), a code of professional conduct like the Hippocratic Oath ("First of all, do no harm"), a religious creed like the Ten Commandments ("Thou Shalt not kill..."), or a wise aphorisms like the sayings of Confucius.⁵
- **Antinomianism: There are no norms. [Lying is neither right nor wrong.]**
- There are no norms of any sort, so norms can never conflict.
- This theory gives no guidance on what to do in any situation. ("Man is an empty bubble floating on the sea of nothingness.")

⁵<https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/whatis#:~:text=This%20is%20the%20most%20common,or%20in%20other%20social%20settings.>

- **Generalism: There are no universal norms. [Lying is generally wrong.]**
- There are no universal norms but there are many ethical norms of general value, but none are universal (i.e., all have some exceptions). The exceptions provide a way to resolve conflicts between moral duties.
- **Situationalism: There is one universal norm. [Lying is sometimes right.]**
- There is one universal norm, and it applies universally (ex.: Love). All other norms are relative and are to be submitted to this one.
- **Non-conflicting absolutism: There are many non-conflicting universal norms. [Lying is always wrong.]**
- There are many ethical norms that are universal in nature. When these absolute norms seem to conflict, there is always an explanation. The norms never produce more conflicts.
- **Ideal (conflicting) absolutism: There are many conflicting universal norms. [Lying is never right.]**
- There are many ethical norms, they are universal, and they do conflict. While ideally the universal norms do not (would not) conflict, in reality they do because reality is not ideal. In a perfect world (sinless), these norms would never be in conflict; because our world (sinful) has fallen from the realm of God's perfect order, conflicts result. Ethical conflicts, then, are the natural outworking of the evil conditions of the real world.
- **Hierarchialism: There are hierarchically ordered universal norms. [Lying is sometimes right.]**
- Universal norms are arranged on a scale of good, ranging from least to most good (a hierarchy of norms, based on their significance).
- When ethical conflicts exist, the responsibility is to follow the norm which results in the most good. When the "higher" norm is followed, the "lower" one is exempted in light of the existing conflict. The solution to ethical conflicts is to "do the higher good," realizing that responsibility to the "lower norm" has been exempted and, therefore, not accept guilt in this instance.

What best characterizes our culture today?⁶

- Until recently, Christianity was under fire at most universities because it was thought to be unscientific, and consequently, untrue. Today, at least for the past thirty years, **Christianity has been often rejected merely because it claims to be true. Increasingly, academics regard anyone claiming to know truth as intolerant and arrogant.**
- What accounted for this bizarre and growing consensus? It has been called postmodernism. Presently, we are in both the postmodern and post-post modern age (some call it the "post-Christian" age; even the "post-secular age").

⁶ Ibid.

- **What is it that we are talking about? Pluralism**...simply the recognition that different cultures believe different things.
- Pluralism is best distilled in the popular mantra: “That may be your truth, but it’s not my truth.”
- “Pluralism in a general sense says there can be multiple perspectives or truths that exist simultaneously, even if some of those perspectives are contradictory. It’s contrasted with monism, which says only one kind of thing exists; dualism, which says there are only two kinds of things (for example, mind and body); and nihilism, which says that no things exist.”⁷
 - Pay attention to what’s being said here...*multiple perspective or truths that exist simultaneously*.
 - Can you have two truths which are equally true?
 - I like what Walter Martin says “Truth by definition is exclusive. If truth were all-inclusive, nothing would be false.”⁸
- Our culture has, long ago, come into the church and the church has bitten off all it could. With the rise of questioning *everything* in the culture, so it has happened in the church.

The Deconstruction of Truth⁹

- As postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty asserts, truth is made rather than found; all truth is socially constructed. That is, social groups (such as Christians, for example, they argue) construct their own “truth” in order to serve their own interests.
 - **Thus, the role of the intellectual is to “deconstruct” truth claims in order to liberate society.**
- "A hermeneutics of suspicion" is then applied to all areas of life. The postmodern mind is one of suspicion. They approach a text (everything in life and culture) not to find out what it objectively means (not for the author's intent), but to unmask what it is hiding.
- What has been understood and affirmed as truth, argue the postmodernists, is nothing more than a convenient structure of thought intended to oppress the powerless.
- Truth is not objectively real, for all truth is merely constructed by every culture – truth is relative to the community in which we participate. Therefore, truth is made, not found.
- While individuals define truth as they see fit, the community of which they’re a part greatly influences that decision.
- **Further, only those within the community have the right to criticize fellow members’ brands of truth.**
- Little imagination is needed to see that this radical relativism is a direct challenge to the Christian gospel.

⁷ <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-cultural-pluralism/>

⁸ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*

⁹ David Burggraff

- **All texts** – whether the Holy Scripture, the United States Constitution, or the works of Mark Twain – are subjected to criticism and dissection, all in the name of liberation. Therefore, the Bible is subjected to radical reinterpretation, often with little or no regard for the plain meaning of the Scripture. Texts which are not pleasing to the postmodern mind are rejected as oppressive, patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic, or deformed by some other political or ideological bias.
- Our culture has lately taught an entire generation that the most important value is tolerance. Every person has the right to his or her own beliefs. Diversity is the celebrated – even moral diversity.
- It is insulting to most post-moderns to be told there is only one way to do something – especially one way to believe. Among the dethroned authorities are texts, authors, traditions, metanarratives, the Bible, God, and all powers on earth and in heaven.
- **Ministers** are representatives of this autocratic deity and are to be resisted as authorities as well.
- **Preachers** are tolerated so long as they stick to therapeutic messages of enhanced self-esteem, and resisted whenever they inject divine authority or universal, absolute truth claims in their sermons.
- **Christians** in the marketplace are also viewed by their colleagues as “authoritarian” and as such are to be “dethroned” (“defanged”).
- In other words, the world has decided that there is no truth except what one wants to believe. Nobody is allowed to challenge that truth unless they are from that same culture/sub-culture. If you are not tolerant of what others believe, then you are part of the problem.
- “...tolerance does not mean tolerance. It means first, acceptance. And second, celebration. That is totalitarianism: You not only have to live with what you may differ with, dear citizen, you have to celebrate it or pay a steep price.”¹⁰
- Our culture is not interested in being simply accepted as they are or want to be. The entire goal is to have what they believe to be right, be actually taught as right.
- “Evil preaches tolerance until it is dominant, then it tries to silence good.”¹¹

Think and act differently than the culture you live in.

- **Christian ethics is firmly absolutist.** It is based on the character of an unchanging God “who cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). It is manifested in God’s law which “cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and in the person of Jesus Christ who “is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).
- Relativism is no option for a Christian. To be realistic, however, we live in a relativistic age. “Absolutism” is for most people we are around an archaic and untenable concept.

¹⁰ Dennis Prager

¹¹ Archbishop Charles J. Chaput

- For Christians the source of morality is God’s revelation.
- When asked why we believe some things are right and others are wrong, we have but one answer: *because God said so*.
- How do we know what God has said?
- We know it because God revealed it.
- **The nature of morality @ Christian:**
 - Morality is objective, not subjective.
 - Morality has an absolute basis.
 - Morality is normative, not utilitarian.
 - Morality is discovered, not created by man.
- **The superiority of the Christian view of right.**
 - A superior source: God.
 - A superior personal manifestation: Christ
 - A superior ethical declaration: the Bible.
 - A superior motivation: the love of Christ.

THE DOCTRINAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS

What you do is based on what you believe.

- Beliefs determine behavior. (ex: Epistle of James).
- Doctrine is closely related to action throughout the entire New Testament.
 - In most of his epistles, Paul lays a doctrinal foundation and then shifts in the later chapters to practical exhortation from that doctrinal basis.
 - Ephesians 4:1-3 begins just such a practical section. Notice also 2 Tim. 3:16-17; and Titus 3:8.
- Theology governs ethics. (*one of the reasons we are a teaching church*)
 - Practice (one’s conduct) is important, but principles are far more so, because understanding and knowledge are essential to right outcomes in practice. Conversely, right practice is evidence of the existence of right principles. What we sincerely and actually believe and think makes us what we are and determines what we do.

Basic Tenets of Christian Ethics

- **Theological tenet (the Character of God). Four truths regarding God:**
 - God is the source of all things. Gen. 1:1; Jn. 1:1-3
 - God is a person. Gen. 1:1

- God is supreme and holy. Isa. 6:3; 1 Pet. 1:16; Ps. 25:8
 - A thing that is in conformity to the will and character of God is good.
 - A thing that is contrary to the will and character of God is bad, evil, wrong.
- God is absolutely unchangeable. Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8
- **Anthropological tenet**
 - A central insight of an authentically Christian morality (ethic) is its realism concerning the limitations of human nature.
 - Christian morality addresses the human situation with an informed realism about its strictly limited possibilities.
 - The doctrine of original sin destroys naïve views of human perfectibility. There is, according to this doctrine, something inherently wrong with human nature, something that makes it self-centered, rebellious and disobedient.¹²
 - Because of Adam’s sin (Gen 3), there is an **impulse to sin (depravity)** within all human beings.
- **Soteriological tenet**
 - God in His grace has made provision for the restoration of man.
 - Sacrifice is the means by which the penalty of sin is removed. Heb. 9:1-28
 - Faith is the means by which restoration can be affected. Heb. 10:10, 35, 38; 11:1, 6.
 - The provision for restoration is itself ethical.
 - Jesus Christ met the demands of God’s holiness
 - The satisfaction of Christ is three-fold. Gal. 2:20
 - Life from Christ (Calvary)
 - Life in Christ (“Christ lives in me”- indwelling)
 - Life of Christ (“I now live” - Christian living is allowing Christ to live through us).

NEXT WEEK

- Using what we have learned over the past two weeks, we are going to begin by looking at abortion and doctor assisted suicide for those who are terminally ill, elderly and with disabilities.
- Is there ever a time, no matter how rare, the one should decide to have an abortion or allow a doctor to end the life of someone.

¹² McGrath, *Doctrine and Ethics* 152.