

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 33

Ethics – Part 1

I like clarity. I like things black and white. The grey doesn't give me the hives like it used to, but it still raises my blood pressure.

American football sits well with me because the white out of bounds line is easy to follow. If you cross over and touch that white line, then you are out of bounds. I get a bit more apprehensive over international football (American "soccer"). In soccer, if the ball goes on the white line it is still in play. It is out of bounds only once it fully crosses the out of bounds line. It seems to me the out of bounds line should be called, the "almost out of bounds line."

When I was 20, I took a class where we studied ethics. One of the books we read was by Joseph Fletcher entitled *Situation Ethics*. The book made me nervous. It advocated an ethical stance where right and wrong were not fixed, where they fluctuated based on the situation or circumstances – where the ends justified the means.

The book gave some situational examples. Some I found more troubling to my fixed ethics than others. As we discussed the book in class, one student brought up an ethical scenario having just read Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*: If you had hidden a Jew in your attic and a German soldier came to your door asking about it, then would you lie and give up the Jew, knowing it would likely lead to the Jew's death?

It reminded me of the story in Joshua chapter 2, about Rahab the harlot. Rahab was not a Jew, but she gave lodging to two of Joshua's spies. The king of Jericho heard the spies were there, and he sent men to get them from Rahab. Rahab hid the spies and lied about it to the king's men. The king did not get the men, Jericho fell to the Jews, and Rahab was spared along with her household. Of Rahab, the book of Hebrews says:

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies (Heb. 11:31).

What would I do in that situation? Would I deceive those asking? Would I do it bluntly, just flat out lying with a "No"? Or, would I be crafty with the deception, and use words that left a deceptive impression, even though the words were not technically a "lie." Would I answer honestly and pray that God stops up the ears

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of the soldiers so they did not hear, knowing that my actions have likely condemned people to death? These are hard ethical questions.

As Christians, we have Scripture and its teachings and insight, yet we have to take those words of divine revelation and decide how and in what way they apply to our decision-making and value systems. That is what we are trying to do as we study Paul's teachings on ethics.

A forty-five minute lesson or chapter will not cover this subject sufficiently. The subject mandates more attention than that. These lessons, however, because of format and time limitations must be divided into such segments, and we are left teaching multiple lessons that fit closely together. So, if for some reason you miss one, then please take advantage of the Internet to download what you miss.¹

This is a logical extension to the last two classes that have dealt with issues of "sanctification" and "discerning God's guidance." For in those classes, we kept returning to the need for understanding and applying Scripture to our lives.²

WHAT ARE "ETHICS" AND WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

If you were to pull *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* ("ISBE") off the bookshelf and look up "ethics," then you would find a number of entries spanning almost 30 pages. The entries are divided into a category for Old Testament Ethics, another for the "Ethic of Jesus," still another for "New Testament Ethics," "Philosophical Ethics," and "Ethics and Dogmatics."³

Why so many sections? Are not Biblical Ethics the same, whether found in the Old Testament, the gospels, or the epistles? If they are the same, then why are there different entries? If they are not the same, then why are they different?

The first place to begin unraveling these questions is with the word "ethics." We should begin by discussing what the word is, both in its scholastic usage as well as everyday usage.

¹ Lessons are available in audio, video, and written form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

² See Theology of Paul lessons 30 and 31 available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

³ I have left out here the section on "Modern Problems." See *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans 1982) Vol. 2. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* is not the only reference work that divides ethics into similar categories for study. See also *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992) Vol. 2. where ethics are divided into Old Testament and New Testament with separate divisions within those entries.

In everyday usage, we refer to “ethics” as the principles or morals that guide our lives. In other words, our ethics are what we believe to be right and wrong values to try to live out in our daily decisions of life.

Scholars trace the development of our English word “ethics” from the Greek word “*ethos*” (ἦθος), which means “custom, usage, manners, habit.”⁴ We see this meaning range in the New Testament usage of *ethos*. For example in Acts, Festus used the word in speaking to King Agrippa about Paul and what to do with the case against Paul. Agrippa said, “I answered them that it was not the **custom** (*ethos*) of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face” (Acts 25:16). Paul also used the word in this typical sense in 1 Corinthians 15:33:

Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals (*ethos*).”

Paul was confirming a well-known saying, that one’s habits and manners (*ethos*) are affected negatively when one spends an inordinate amount of time with those less well behaved.

From this range of meaning, we can readily see that scholars write on ethics as the science of conduct. The scholastic study of ethics is the study of the values, rules or principles that guide decision making in life. Scholastics are involved in setting out systems (or “non-systems” in the case of Fletcher, *et al.*⁵) by which we can reasonably make moral decisions or judgments. In other words, what is “right” or “wrong,” or what is “good” or “bad”? Of course, this scholastic discussion involves more than simply listing actions into categories. The discussion also includes *why* certain actions are deemed moral or ethical, and why others are not.

Many in our churches see such discussions as fruitless wastes of time. Our faith, we think, tells us that if we follow the Bible as God’s word, then the Bible gives us the rules setting out right and wrong and we follow those rules. In this lesson, as we explore Paul on the issue of ethics, we certainly agree that we have in Scripture God’s divine revelation that gives us insight and a basis for understanding right and wrong. But it is not always so simple, even with the availability of Scripture.

Perhaps you have heard (or in my case used) the expression, “God says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” There is some admirable and needed force behind such belief. But as life’s experiences pile up, we might find that such an approach

⁴ Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford 1966). We should add that the Latin word for habit is *mos*. From this Latin word we get the English word “moral.” So “morality” comes from the Latin word “habit” while “ethics” comes from the Greek word for “habit”.

⁵ Fletcher, Joseph, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Westminster Press 1966) at 12.

is not always full or fair. Some might term this approach an oversimplification when it comes to life's more complicated ethical decisions.

Even the most devout Bible student must carefully consider Scripture and other factors in deciding in 21st Century life what is appropriate conduct. Here is another example, although one for which I have no polling data. In 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul said that women should not adorn themselves with "braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire." How many Bible believers take that as ethical gospel? Surely, some do, but it is a very small minority of those who look to the Bible for morals that do not have a gold ring, or have at times braided hair.

How do we understand the following passages of Scripture, both taken from the Torah or "Law" section of the Old Testament?

- In Genesis 12, that great man of faith, Abraham (called "Abram" at the time) is going with his wife Sarah (called "Sarai" at the time) into Egypt. As they are about to enter, Abraham said to Sarah, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live" (Gen. 12:11-12). Abraham then tells Sarah to lie about who she was, and tell the Egyptians she was his sister rather than his wife. Abraham does the same in Genesis 20 before Abimelech, king of Gerar. Abraham justified this internally by the fact that Sarah was his half sister (same father, different mother) (Gen. 20:12).

The comments on these passages have ranged from condemnation for Abraham's lie to acceptance for a reasoned deception. Augustine wrote of these options around 400 AD in his books against the Manichaen Faustus:

Some people...in commenting on this act of Abraham, are of the opinion that he stumbled from weakness of faith, and denied his wife from fear of death as Peter denied the Lord. If this is correct, we must view that Abraham sinned...But when there is another explanation, why not abide by it...He did not deny that Sara was his wife in answer to any question on the subject; but when asked who she was, he said she was his sister, without denying her to be his wife: he concealed part of the truth, but said nothing false.⁶

Augustine, it seems, would find solace in an approach that results in deception as against a literal lie or falsehood! We consider another example from the Torah:

⁶ Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, translation by Stothert in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans 1989 printing), Vol. IV at 285-286.

- In Exodus 1, the Jews are in Egypt and multiplying too rapidly and strongly for Pharaoh's safety. So, Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives to kill any sons born to the Jewish mothers. The midwives refuse to follow this instruction because of their fear of God. As sons continue to come forth, Pharaoh challenges the midwives: "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" The answer given by the midwives was an outright lie: "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." We are then told, "So God dealt well with the midwives...And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families" (Ex. 1:15-22).

Does this mean that lying is sometimes wrong, or sometimes permissible? Are other factors at play of which we do not know? Is this an example of lying still being wrong, but God blessing the pure motive as opposed to the incorrect decision? Is this something we can just relegate to the older pages of Scripture that do not always make perfect sense to us thousands and thousands of years later?

If we fast-forward to the 21st Century, we face different sets of facts, but some that still call for difficult moral choices. Consider the case of Mrs. Bergmeier as given by Fletcher in his book. During the later days of WWII, the Russian army driving to the heart of Berlin found Mrs. Bergmeier foraging for food to feed her three children. Her husband had been captured by the Allies earlier in the war and was shipped off to a POW facility in Wales. The Russian soldiers who caught Mrs. Bergmeier shipped her off to a prison camp in the Ukraine.

After the war, the husband returned home and worked to re-gather his family. He found the three children, but could never determine what happened to his wife, their mother. Word got to Mrs. Bergmeier from backdoor channels that her husband had returned, found the children, and was searching for her. She also learned that the only ways out of the prison camp was either to be desperately sick, in which event she would be sent to a hospital, or to be pregnant, in which event she would be shipped back to Germany as a liability.

Mrs. Bergmeier asked a guard to impregnate her, and once her pregnancy was confirmed, she was sent home to her family.

Was this a moral choice on her behalf? Scripture teaches that adultery is wrong. There is no exception given in Scripture for post war family reconstruction. Should Mrs. Bergmeier live her life out in faith that her motherless children would be better than they would be with her at home? Or, should she cross the adultery line in an effort to take care of her family?

Is this a moral question Scripture addresses? We suggest the answer to this question is both "yes" and "no." There are weighty scriptures that apply to

multiple aspects of this dilemma. Yet for many, there is tension as one tries to decide exactly which ones apply with how much force! The point is that Scripture does not always give a flat clear answer that is not at least subject to some analysis, if not debate.

Related problems arise as the Christian seeks to understand whether the imperatives and injunctions in Scripture are all equal. Specifically, do the Old Testament's instructions carry equal weight to those in the New Testament. For that matter, do all Old Testament teachings and instructions carry the same weight?

What do we do with the Old Testament scriptures like Leviticus 19:12 where we read:

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

We then consider this Old Testament injunction as Jesus pointed it out adding to it:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn." But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"; anything more than this comes from evil. (Mt. 5:33-37).

Our examples could continue both from those Jesus set out (*i.e.*, an eye for an eye, versus turning the other cheek – Mt. 5:38-39) and from those he did not (*i.e.*, laws for cleaning houses from mold or disease – Lev. 14:33-57).

These types of passages are what cause commentators and scholars to divide up ethics into categories like the "Old Testament Ethics" and the "Ethic of Jesus" entries discussed earlier. We can agree that there is room for such divisions, but we would suggest that there is an overriding view of morality and ethics that unify both the Old Testament teachings as well as those of Jesus and the New Testament. We will explore such a unifying model in this lesson. Our next lesson will then take the unifying concepts and apply them to the teachings of Paul both to demonstrate the consistency of the concepts and to gather the further insight that God provides through Paul's teaching.

Having set out some of the problems, we begin to work toward a framework for understanding in a unified manner the ethics of Old and New Testament.

OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

To understand the unity of the ethics in the various parts and ages reflected in Scripture, we first need to understand the distinctions. David Alan Hubbard, a Professor of Old Testament from Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote the article on Old Testament Ethics in *ISBE*. As an Old Testament scholar, Hubbard traced the source of Old Testament ethics to “the will of Yahweh for the people He has created and with whom he has made covenant.”⁷ He then divides the ethics delivered in the Old Testament into those found in instructions of (1) worship, (2) Law, and (3) wisdom.

(1) Worship. The worship ethics involve the details of worship **rites** given in the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament), especially in Exodus through Deuteronomy. An example of these rites would be the paying of first fruits (think “tithe”) in worship to the Lord as set forth in Deuteronomy 26. Worship ethics also include the admonitions of specific directions contained in the Psalms. These contain instructions of attitude as well as expression of that attitude in forms of worship. Psalm 15 is an example of attitude and conduct ethic in worship. The Psalmist asks:

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?

The Psalm then answers:

He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put his money out at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

We have an example of worship in expression in Psalm 149:

Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly! Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their king! Let them praise his name with

⁷ *ISBE* at 165.

dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! For the Lord takes pleasure in his people.

(2) Law. The Old Testament's Law ethics cover both the teachings of the stories in the first five books of the Old Testament as well as the statutes of Exodus through Deuteronomy.

The stories give us positive ethics from narratives like Joseph's refusal to sin by committing adultery with Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39) and Abraham's fairness in buying a burial plot for his wife Sarah from the Hittites (Gen. 23). There are also negative ethics exposed in the narratives, notably in the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18 and 19) and Esau disposing his birthright (Gen. 25).

The statutes give ethical teaching in principle as well as specific behavior. General ethical teaching is found in passages like Deuteronomy 6 where Moses says:

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life.

Moses then follows up this introduction of the statutes by giving the principle and motive that should underlie all obedience:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

This attitude is important as a part of the moral force behind the other statutes. For simple obedience without the correct attitude is not truly ethical. We will see this same emphasis in Paul when he wrote, "If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

The Law's statutes govern more than attitude, they also instruct behavior. These behavioral instructions govern individuals in forms that are both positive (e.g., "These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat," etc. – Dt. 14:4ff) and negative (e.g., "you shall not eat these: the camel, the hare, and the rock badger" – Dt. 14:7). The statutes also govern corporate behavior ("When you go out to war against your enemies...the priest shall come forward and speak to the people..." – Dt. 20:1ff).

Breaching these laws in attitude and action became the basis for most of the prophetic denunciations of Israel. Consider the example found in Amos 2:6-8 where the Lord announced through his prophet:

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted...”

(3) Wisdom. A third area of ethics in the Old Testament is found in the wisdom literature. Most of these ethical ideas are found in the wisdom books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, but they are also found in the Psalms and throughout the Old Testament.

Like the Law, wisdom’s ethics comes in positive and negative forms. A positive example is found in Proverbs 3:5:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

A negative example is found in Proverbs 24:28-29:

Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, “I will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay back for what he has done.”

Now, the examples we have pulled out of the various places and types of ethics found in the Old Testament all make fairly good sense to us today, in that they are ethics that we find admirable today, save maybe the dietary instructions and having an Israelite priest bless the troops and give a pre-battle pep talk! But, there are many examples we have not used that do not resound so clearly with our ethics today.

We did not use the example of Joshua’s complete destruction of the people of Ai, including the women and children (Joshua 8), nor did we cover the case of a man who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath day in Numbers 16. The people who found this man gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron. There, “the LORD said to Moses, ‘The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp’” (Num. 16:35).

These more difficult ethical teachings bring into sharper focus certain distinctions as we consider the ethics of Christ and the writers of the New Testament. Unfortunately, the New Testament ethics must wait for the next lesson. Ideally after giving that further analysis, we would then give our unifying principle; however, in the interest of not leaving anyone hanging who might get only this lesson, we deliver the shorthand rendition of the unifying principle as a prelude of things to come!

UNIFYING PRINCIPLE OF THE BIBLE⁸

As we speak of a “unifying principle,” we are talking of what is a consistent view of ethics that combines what we read in the Old Testament to what we read in the New Testament in a coherent fashion. In other words, as we proclaim the orthodox truth that God is unchangeable, how is it that the ethics seems different in some ways, yet the same in others.

The answer in shorthand form is found in the question itself. God does not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and will be the same tomorrow. (“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” Heb. 13:8). So, if God has not changed, then what has? Clearly the culture and situations!

We contend that ethics and morals are ultimately expressions of God’s character and morality. We see God’s ethics and morality delivered to humanity in various places and various forms as he saw fit to communicate. Yet, the coherent universal truth is that humanity, made in God’s image, is created to see God’s ethics as the true moral ground for behavior.

We should underscore here that we are not talking of situation ethics in the vein of Joseph Fletcher. For we are not suggesting that the end always justifies the means, nor are we suggesting that there is no absolute right and wrong. There is right and wrong. It is the character and morality of God. How that right and wrong are expressed in daily life is what can differ, depending sometimes on circumstances or situations.

As society and circumstances change, we see that God’s course of action might alter, even while the character and true moral ethic of God never changes. As we shall see later, in a perfect world, things would play out quite differently than in the mucky and muddy world of sin that lives in darkness. It leaves God’s righteousness finding what are sometimes unusual expressions viewed from a moral high ground.

We will also see why Jesus, God incarnate, was not living in abrogation of the Law. He lived the perfect fulfillment of the Law. For in Christ, we see the truest expression in every situation he faced, of how God’s righteous morality would act. His life was, in every sense of the word, “perfect.”

⁸ This paper is not presenting a “unifying principle” from a philosophical study of ethics. That endeavor is beyond the scope of this class. (That said, it is one that I would love to spend time on!) This lesson series is concerned with a unifying theory that shows the Old Testament ethics and the ethics of the New Testament have an overarching consistency. Writers as early as Marcion (See Church History Literacy lesson 8 at www.biblical-literacy.com) argued that the God of the Old Testament was different than the God of the New Testament because the ethics seems to differ so greatly. One of our goals here is to show that false.

Join us in the next lesson for more as we probe ethics from the New Testament and test our unifying theory to see if it makes sense of what we have studied in the Old Testament, and if it gives us insight into the moral choices we face today.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“No one is good but God alone”* (Mk 10:18).

God is good. He is what gives meaning to our word, “good.” “Good” describes God, his character, and ethic. God’s moral nature is the moral ground of what we have termed “good.” “Good” is not a democratic term. By that we mean it is not a word that derives its meaning off what most people think! We cannot say that the actions of Hitler were good because most of the population he governed approved those actions. “Good” is not some arbitrary word that has meaning only as given by 51 percent of the people. “Good” is a word that we use to describe the heart and actions of God. As such, we understand “good” to the degree we understand God. As God is revealed, albeit in a distorted form, in this fallen world, cultures the world over have many similarities in understanding what good is. But the true picture and revelation of God comes through his word, both Jesus the Word of God and Scripture, God’s inspired word. It is in Scripture that we read and understand the life of Christ and the character of God as he interacted with humanity. We diligently study and dwell on his word for in that we find good and true morality and ethic.

2. *“Bad company ruins good morals”* (1 Cor. 15:33).

Paul was right! As we consider morals and ethics, we do well to go to Scripture, not only to discern God’s character, but also to spend time in the presence of “good company” confident that there is an inverse to Paul’s statement, mainly that “good company promotes good morals!” Let us also use Paul’s admonition to carefully reflect on the ones with whom we choose to spend our time. Do we spend our time with those who build character, who point to God and his morality? Or, do we spend our time dallying in the mud with those who turn us away from the Lord?

3. *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”* (Heb. 13:8).

As we consider next week’s lesson, take a moment for some homework. Ask yourself about ethical dilemmas you have experienced, or those others have experienced. Are there some where you question the applicability of the teachings of Scripture? Do you or someone you know have areas where

one might wonder if it is as simple as “Thou shalt...” or “Thou shalt not...”? If so, consider sending the dilemma to me via email. I will keep them confidential, but may be able to use them to offer greater insight as we go into the further lessons on this issue. Regardless of whether you send them, take time to prayerfully set them before God, and at the risk of sounding like a bracelet, ask yourself the question, “What would Jesus do?” if he were in your place. This should shed some insight into your moral decision.