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כִּי יִי לֹא תִרְצֶה

An Introduction to
Biblical Ethics

עֲנֵה

DAVID W. JONES

בְּדֹאֵת לֹא תִחְמַד



Nashville, Tennessee

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For Johnathan, Laura, Alison, Madeline,
and Kimberly, with hope (Prov 22:6)

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Series Preface

The greatest challenge to the life and witness of the church in our age is widespread moral confusion and denial of moral authority. This condition has been greatly influenced by a number of factors, including postmodern denial of objective truth, secularization of common life, pluralization of worldviews, and privatization of religion—all accompanied by growing hostility toward anything Christian. In fact, claims of objective moral authority and understanding are openly contested by our culture more than any other aspects of Christian faith and witness. Those who are redefining justice, character, and truth are working hard to deconstruct essential social institutions to justify a variety of ends: pursuing sensuality, elevating lifestyle over protecting innocent human life, stealing what others have fairly acquired, ridiculing the rule of law, abandoning the needy for self-fulfillment, and forsaking lifelong commitments. They reject the Judeo-Christian values on which the institutions of Western civilization were erected (i.e., marriage, property ownership, free-market enterprise, justice, law, education, and national security) and without which they cannot endure. Never in the history of the church has there been a more critical need for scholarship, instruction, and application of Christian ethics in ways that equip Christian men and women to engage the surrounding culture in prophetic moral witness.

This series aims to promote understanding and respect for the reality and relevance of God's moral truth—what Francis Schaeffer called “true truth”—in contrast to truth claims that are false or distorted. We hope these books will serve as a resource for Christians to resist compromise and to contend with the moral war raging through our culture and tormenting the church. Some authors in

this series will address the interpretation of biblical teachings; others will focus on the history, theological integration, philosophical analysis, and application of Christian moral understanding. But all will use and apply God's moral truth in ways that convince the mind, convict the heart, and consume the soul.

In *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, David W. Jones introduces readers to the field of biblical ethics. Readers may wonder how biblical ethics relates to Christian ethics. Are these different terms for one thing or terms for two different things? The answer is, they are different things that are closely connected. All worthy teaching of Christian ethics should be biblical in the sense of being faithful to biblical moral revelation, centered on biblical content, and compatible with biblical framing of reality and truth. But biblical ethics is distinct in that it focuses on exactly what the Bible says in matters of right or wrong moral action, good and bad moral character, and worthy or unworthy moral goals. So while Christian ethics includes biblical ethics, centers on biblical ethics, and builds on biblical ethics, the fields have different boundaries. As a field of study, biblical ethics is part of the larger field of Christian ethics; and Christian ethics is larger because it addresses philosophical thinking, theological doctrines, historical movements, and applying God's moral standards to moral issues of the day—as well as what the Bible specifically says on moral matters.

This introduction to biblical ethics is bibliocentric, theocentric, and Christocentric. This means the author: (1) not only describes what the Bible says but treats what it says as authoritative, inerrant, relevant, and necessary; (2) not only accepts biblical teaching as a good way of doing things but as applying eternal, divine, moral laws to everyday life; and (3) not only embraces a theistic worldview but affirms the uniqueness of Christ as the way, the truth, and the life—not only for Christians but for everyone everywhere.

While other books sometimes reduce biblical ethics to a version of human philosophy or just one of various humanly generated religious traditions, this text assumes and defends the view that biblical ethics is a matter of truth that cannot be reduced to humanly defined terms whether philosophical or religious. It is a matter of theology, not philosophy, and not just a matter of human speculation about theology but of true and reliable communication from the only God who exists. It comes from a source

of truth and authority in a category to itself, one transcending all others including those defined by philosophical reason or arising from religious imagination. In other words this book treats biblical ethics as truth authoritatively and reliably revealed by the one true God for all humanity regarding the only standards that will matter at the end of time when each individual stands before the judgment seat of God.

An Introduction to Biblical Ethics by David W. Jones will prepare students, teachers, and scholars for moral battle; resource churches to inspire holiness and expose corruption; equip parents to raise children who pursue righteousness and virtue; and challenge all of us to grow in the fear of God, motivated by love for God as directed by the Word of God.

Daniel R. Heimbach
Series Editor

Preface

I took my first class in biblical ethics in college more than twenty years ago. My memories about that class are not good. I recall that the professor clearly did not want to teach the course (it was a Monday night class that interfered with his desire to watch football). I remember that the lectures were monotone, philosophical presentations that I had a tough time finding relevant to my life. I also recall that the textbook was bad—exceptionally bad. The writing was dry, the content was way over my head, and the author seemed to have a way of muddling even the simplest of issues. Honestly, I quit reading the textbook about a third of the way through the course and just held on for a passing grade. In fact, I sold the book back to the campus bookstore at the end of the semester for laundry money. So much for the great beginnings of my career as a professional ethicist.

It was not until I enrolled in an ethics course in seminary that I came to understand that ethics is not to be equated with tedious legalism, works-based salvation, or some type of self-sanctification project. Rather, ethics is Christian living; it is the blueprint for a Christian worldview; it is applied theology. With this new and correct perspective I began to embrace the field of ethics, with a special interest in biblical ethics. For more than a decade now I have been teaching undergraduate and graduate students in the field of Christian ethics at Southeastern Seminary (Wake Forest, NC), as well as at other institutions as a visiting professor. It has been my goal to provide those who take my classes with a more interesting and thorough introduction to the field of ethics than I had in college. You would have to ask some of my former students to learn whether I have succeeded in teaching ethics winsomely; yet, I have

been blessed to see a handful of former students go on to earn doctorates in the field. Perhaps this has been in spite of my classes, but I like to think that, in part, it has been because of them.

This book is essentially the content of my biblical ethics class in book form. In writing this text I have purposely tried to keep the discussion at an introductory level. I am not assuming that the reader has any knowledge in the field of ethics prior to reading this book. I envision this volume being well within reach of college and seminary students, as well as, perhaps, motivated laypeople. For the most part, in this book I have chosen the authors of other introductory-level textbooks as my discussion partners. Classic works and figures in the field of ethics are also incorporated into the dialogue that follows. I have intentionally suppressed tangential and more advanced discussions into the footnotes. Additionally, you will find summary points at the end of each chapter, as well as a glossary in the back of this book. I hope that this approach and writing style will hold the attention of readers unfamiliar with the field, while at the same time providing a comprehensive introduction to this discipline.

As with any book, many individuals contributed their time and talents in order to make this project possible. I would like to thank all of those who read parts or all of this manuscript and offered many helpful corrections and insights. Special thanks are due to Billie Goodenough, Daniel Heimbach, Dawn Jones, Matthew Shores, Andrew Spencer, John Tarwater, and Chris Thompson, among others who are too numerous to name. Additionally, I would like to thank the hundreds of students who have taken my classes over the years and, through their questions and comments, unknowingly helped shape this book. Of course, any errors in content or form in the following pages are solely the responsibility of the author.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In his discourse on morality recorded in Plato's *Republic*, the storied philosopher Socrates declared, "We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live."¹ Indeed, the discussion of ethics is important, for on a daily basis humans are confronted with questions of right and wrong. In practice, when ethical encounters arise, individuals with the capacity for moral evaluation do not usually make decisions arbitrarily; rather, people tend to make ethical choices that conform to certain patterns or models.² This is so because, whether consciously or not, everyone with the ability to make moral judgments has a system of ethics out of which he or she operates. On account of this truth, as well as the inevitability of moral encounters, it is important to be aware of and to understand one's own system of ethics.

This is a book about biblical ethics. Biblical ethics is a subcategory of the discipline of Christian ethics, which is sometimes called

¹ Plato, *Republic*, 1.352d.

² Traditionally, Protestants have held that those without the capacity to make moral choices, such as infants and those with severely diminished mental capacity, are not accountable for otherwise immoral acts. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* teaches, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how He pleases: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word" (10.3). For more on the eternal fate of deceased infants, see Daniel L. Akin and R. Albert Mohler, "The Salvation of 'Little Ones': Do Infants Who Die Go to Heaven?" *SBC Life* (May 1998): 12–13; John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); and Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

moral theology.³ Biblical ethics differs from secular ethics, which is sometimes referred to as moral philosophy, in that it is distinctively Christian in its approach to ethical evaluation as it uses the Bible as its source of moral authority.⁴ Moreover, biblical ethics is more specific than Christian ethics proper in that it specifically focuses on the study, structure, and application of the moral law as it is revealed in Scripture. In order to appreciate the uniqueness of the discipline of biblical ethics, especially as it differs from non-Christian systems of ethics, it will be helpful to sketch out several distinctives of biblical ethics at the outset of this discussion.

Distinctives of Biblical Ethics

ONE MAJOR DISTINCTIVE OF BIBLICAL ETHICS is that it is built on an objective, theistic worldview. In other words, biblical ethics assumes the presence of a fixed moral order in the world that proceeds from God. Therefore, advocates of biblical ethics affirm the existence of universal, moral absolutes. In contrast, secular ethics rests on a subjective, anthropocentric worldview that stems from the heart and mind of man. Since it is a man-centered enterprise, advocates of secular ethics usually deny the existence of universal moral absolutes.⁵ Stated another way, biblical ethics seek to identify and to follow a universal, divine *ought*, whereas secular ethics tend to focus on a local, human *should*. As Frame and others have noted,⁶ if one

³ In saying biblical ethics is a subcategory of the discipline of Christian ethics, it should not be inferred that Christian ethics proper is not biblical. Rather, the umbrella of Christian ethics, which is biblical, contains many more specific fields of study such as biblical ethics and historical ethics, as well as many topic-focused disciplines such as the ethics of wealth and poverty, environmental ethics, and the ethics of church-state relations, to name a few.

⁴ The fact that secular ethics is derived from philosophy ought not to lead one to the conclusion that philosophy is either juxtaposed to or of no use in Christian ethics. Indeed, philosophical ethics that stem from a biblical worldview and rely upon Scripture as a source of moral authority are a subcategory of the discipline of Christian ethics.

⁵ Often this denial is evident more by omission than by overt statement. For example, many secular ethics texts lack a discussion of meta-ethics in favor of case-based situational ethics. There is no real discussion of why anything might be a worthy principle. The same is true of many corporate ethics codes.

⁶ After defining ethics as “a means of determining which persons, acts, and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not,” Frame observes, “Many will find this objectionable. Given this definition, for example, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is not about ethics! . . . The same could be said of any non-Christian thinker.” John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 10. Others who have made a similar claim include: Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 16, 18; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 244–46; Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of*

accepts the idea that ethics are by definition objective and universal in nature, then in a sense nontheistic ethics are really not ethics at all. Indeed, while secular ethics serve to promote order, oftentimes they are merely a means by which people further their own self-interests and ideas under the guise of morality, “call[ing] evil good and good evil” (Isa 5:20).

A second distinctive of biblical ethics is that it is not a means of earning favor with God but rather is the natural result of righteousness already imputed by God. To elaborate, secular systems of ethics are often tied to an attempt to earn favor with others or to create a more advantageous environment for oneself. In contrast, biblical ethics understands Jesus Christ to have perfectly modeled righteousness (cf. Heb 2:17–18; 4:15); yet, through his substitutionary atonement, God imputes Jesus’ righteousness to man. As believers gradually adopt biblical ethics, then, they do not accumulate righteousness or merit; rather, they practically become like that which they are already considered to be.⁷ Moreover, this pursuit of sanctification brings glory to God. The apostle Paul described this process as follows, “He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. . . . [I desire to be] found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith” (2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9; cf. 1 Pet 3:18).

A third distinctive of biblical ethics is that it seeks to recognize and to participate in God’s moral order already present within the created order and in special revelation. In other words, biblical ethics is revelatory and participatory in nature, not constructive and formative. Secular systems of ethics tend to view the task of man as constructing and obeying a moral framework. This is especially true in regard to novel or as-yet-addressed ethical issues. By way of contrast, biblical ethics seeks to discover and to be a part of God’s

Freedom, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 7–8; Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 146–47; Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), viii; Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1950), 1; and Francis A. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 5 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 290.

⁷ Interestingly, following Charles Sheldon’s classic work *In His Steps*, concerning moral choices, many modern evangelicals ask the question, “What would Jesus do?” Yet perhaps a better question to ask would be, “What *did* Jesus do?” See Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1896).

moral order that is ever present, especially as it is revealed in the Word of God. Said differently, within biblical ethics the task of the moral agent is to think God's thoughts after him and to act accordingly. Additionally, biblical ethics holds that God's moral order is comprehensive and sufficient for all ethical encounters—past, present, and future. As will be explored in chapters 7 and 8 of this volume, there is no topic that cannot be addressed by moral law within biblical ethics. While topics for ethical discussion change with time, technology, and culture, moral norms remain the same.

A fourth distinctive of biblical ethics is that it affirms immorality stems from human depravity, not primarily from man's ignorance of ethics or from socioeconomic conditions. Since secular systems of ethics generally endorse the goodness of the human heart, remedies for immorality frequently include external fixes such as education and financial provision. Given the presupposition of man's favorable estate, these seem to be logical, if not self-evident, solutions for moral evil. A practical problem with these cures, however, is that experience testifies they rarely do more than produce a temporary veneer of morality at best. By way of contrast, a scriptural evaluation of man's moral condition includes the following: "Every scheme [of man's] mind . . . [is] nothing but evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). "Man's inclination is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). And, "No one is good but One—God" (Luke 18:19).⁸ Therefore, biblical ethics proposes the solution for immorality, both personal and societal (or structural), is a change of man's heart, not merely a modification of man's environment.⁹

⁸ Additional verses that speak to man's moral condition include: "All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment; all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities carry us away like the wind" (Isa 64:6). "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me" (John 15:5). And, "Those [whose lives] are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom 8:8). By way of contrast, note the scriptural charges and description of the moral capacity of the regenerate: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Pet 1:16). And, "For His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness" (2 Pet 1:3). Of course, this is not to say redeemed man will be perfect. Experience testifies Christians, like the unregenerate, will continue to sin. Yet, in light of believers' regenerate condition and divine resources (cf. 1 Cor 10:13), it must be concluded that sin is always by choice, never of necessity. As Martin Luther famously noted, Christians are *simul justus et peccator*—that is, at the same time both righteous and sinful. Cf. WA 39.523; 56.270.9–11; 343.16–23; 351.23–352.7.

⁹ Although a bit hyperbolic, the words of missionary David Brainerd are instructive here: "I never got away from Jesus and him crucified. When my people were gripped by the great evangelical doctrine of Christ and him crucified, I had no need to give them instructions

A fifth and final distinctive of biblical ethics is that in the process of assigning moral praise or blame, biblical ethics incorporates conduct (i.e., the what), character (i.e., the who), and goals (i.e., the why) of individuals involved in moral events. While this distinctive will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter and again in chapter 5, for the present it will suffice to note that non-Christian systems of ethics tend to reduce morality to the level of conduct. Although conduct certainly is an important factor in moral evaluation, especially since character and goals are intangible, to ignore the who and/or the why of a moral event will often result in ethical distortions, including legalism and license, among many others. Moreover, such an approach to ethics can marginalize important moral concepts including volition and motive. The system of biblical ethics, then, seeks to incorporate conduct, character, and goals into the process of moral evaluation.

Defining Biblical Ethics

IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION THE TERMS *ETHICS* and *morality* are frequently used interchangeably. Indeed, even in many introductory-level textbooks—the present one included—the terms *ethics* and *morality*, along with their cognates, are used in a parallel manner. While this is true, it should be noted that in advanced, specialized, or technical discussions of ethics, a distinction is oftentimes made between the two terms.¹⁰ To elaborate, the word *ethics*, which comes from the Greek term *ethos*, is a broad term that refers to a manner of living. The word *morals*, which is derived from the Latin word *mos*, is a more focused term that is used in reference to specific customs, habits, or conduct.¹¹ In other words, ethics emphasizes an entire

about morality.” Philip E. Howard, ed., *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 179.

¹⁰ See the discussions of the differences between ethics and morality in J. Douma, *Responsible Conduct*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 2–5; John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 17–18; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 10–12; John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 11; and Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 15.

¹¹ The difference between “ethics” and “morality” can also be seen in the *Oxford English Dictionary* explanation of the two terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ethics as “the science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human conduct,” while noting that morality pertains to “the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to actions, volitions, or character of responsible being.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s.v. “ethic,” “moral.”

belief system and gives a general perspective; morality emphasizes individual acts and gives specific principles. The distinction between these two terms can be seen further in Moreland and Craig's explanation that "ethics can be understood as the . . . study of morality."¹² So, then, while the terms *ethics* and *morals* will be used interchangeably in this text out of convention, the reader should be aware that the words are not strictly synonymous.

Having covered several of the foundational distinctives of biblical ethics, as well as some of the nuances in ethical terminology, it is now possible to turn to defining *biblical ethics*. Simply put, *biblical ethics* can be understood as the attempt to understand what it means both to live and to think biblically. A more formal definition of *biblical ethics*, however, can be found in Murray's classic work *Principles of Conduct*, the standard twentieth-century text on biblical ethics in the Protestant tradition. Here Murray wrote, "Biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behavior which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces."¹³ Following Murray's lead, an even more specific working definition of *biblical ethics* is as follows: *Biblical ethics is the study and application of the morals prescribed in God's Word that pertain to the kind of conduct, character, and goals required of one who professes to be in a redemptive relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.* This is referred to

¹² J. P. Moreland and W. L. Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 393.

¹³ Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 12. In his book *Biblical Christian Ethics*, Jones has a similar definition of biblical ethics as he writes: "Given the assumption that the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the Bible is the source and norm of Christian ethics as well as Christian doctrine. On this view ethics and dogmatics are not properly separate disciplines but integral parts of the whole study of God's revelation of himself and his will for humankind. Christian ethics is properly a subdivision of systematic theology; it could be called the doctrine of the Christian life." David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 7. In his *Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, another popular, late-twentieth-century, biblical ethics text, McQuilkin defines *biblical ethics* as follows, "The approach of this book is turning to Scripture and examining all texts that deal with each ethical question. . . . We shall treat the Bible as our final authority. And we will seek to apply biblical principles as well as direct mandates, but we will attempt to go only as far as Scripture itself goes and maintain the emphases of the Bible itself. So we call our study *biblical ethics*." Robertson McQuilkin, *Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), ix. Yet another definition of biblical ethics comes from Walter C. Kaiser's recent work in the field. Kaiser writes: "A biblical ethic begins with the light of Scripture. . . . Thus for Christians, biblical ethics is the reflection on human acts and conduct from the perspective given to us in Holy Scripture from our Lord." Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *What Does the Lord Require? A Guide for Preaching and Teaching Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 9.

as a “working definition,” for its component parts will be unpacked and analyzed in the pages that follow in this chapter.

Consequential and Deontological Systems of Ethics

IN THE WORKING DEFINITION OF BIBLICAL ETHICS just given it was noted, “Biblical ethics is the study and application of the morals *prescribed* . . .” In the process of assigning moral praise or blame, then, biblical ethics focuses upon the acts that are committed (or omitted) and their conformity (or lack thereof) to prescribed morals. Yet, this is only one of two possible, normative ways of engaging in moral assessment. To elaborate, in evaluating a moral event, there are two logical possibilities: one can either focus upon the acts that are committed or upon the consequences that result.¹⁴ Stated differently, the age-old question asks, “Do the ends justify the means, or are the means sufficient apart from the ends?”¹⁵ In the formal study of ethics means-based systems are referred to as deontological theories, while ends-based systems are classified as consequentialist or utilitarian theories.

Consequentialist Theories

CONSEQUENTIALIST OR UTILITARIAN SYSTEMS OF ETHICS assign moral praise or blame based on the end results of moral events. That which is moral within a consequentialist system of ethics, then, is the course of action that produces the greatest amount of overall good. Jones summarizes this approach to ethics well, noting that according to “a consequentialist theory of ethics . . . an act is right if it is intended to produce a greater balance of good over evil than any available alternative.”¹⁶ Advocates of this approach to ethics, including classic

¹⁴ Some may want to identify the school of thought known as “virtue ethics” as a third type of ethical system. This, however, is a misunderstanding of virtue ethics, for virtue ethics does not describe a moral event but the character of a moral agent. Indeed, a given virtue cannot be evaluated apart from its manifestation in a moral event. Such evaluation of virtues will be tied to a moral agent’s act and conformity to norms (deontology) or the results of a moral agent’s act (consequentialism). See the discussion of character later in this chapter and in chapter 5.

¹⁵ The first recorded instance of the idea of the ends justifying the means in western literature is in the Greek poet Sophocles’ work *Electra* (c. 409 BC) in which he had his character Orestes remark, “The end excuses any evil.”

¹⁶ Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 127. Rae offers a similarly concise definition, “Utilitarianism commonly argues that the moral choice is the one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people, or the moral choice is the course of action that produces more good consequences than harmful ones.” Rae, *Moral Choices*, 85.

proponents such as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73),¹⁷ usually define “greatest good” in terms of individual or corporate human flourishing. Options for such anthropocentric flourishing include an increase in pleasure, the maximization of happiness, a decrease in pain, the attainment of power, the lowering of financial cost, the feeling of self-actualization, or some similar idea. Therefore, since morality is determined by evaluating results, there is no inherently good or bad act within a pure consequentialist system of ethics.

One should not confuse, however, a consequentialist approach to ethics with a teleological emphasis within a system of ethics. Simply put, teleology refers to “the doctrine of design and purpose.”¹⁸ At first glance, then, to act in a teleological manner appears similar to consequentialism, for both concepts are forward looking. Yet to proceed with design, purpose, and goals in mind is not necessarily synonymous with assigning moral praise or blame based on the results of moral events. As Jones has noted, the similarities of the ideas of teleology and utility have led to “modern confusion of [identifying] teleological ethics with consequentialism.”¹⁹ Yet, while some scholars have made the error of conflating teleology with utility,²⁰ this is a false association, for the concepts are not identical. Moreover, as will be discussed later in this chapter and again in chapter 5, it is possible to have a teleological emphasis within a deontological system of ethics. Indeed, this is true of biblical ethics. Said differently, then, the opposite of a deontological approach to ethics is a consequentialist approach to ethics, not a teleological emphasis within a system of ethics.

¹⁷ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: T. Payne, 1789); John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1987).

¹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s.v. “teleology.”

¹⁹ Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 20–21. Jones also notes: “The ambiguity of the term teleological is the source of some confusion in ethics. Its classic use for the perfection of human nature in conformity with right precepts should be distinguished from the modern use for the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined solely by its consequences.” *Ibid.*, 18 n. 5.

²⁰ For example, Rae writes: “Teleological systems are systems that are based upon the end result produced by an action. . . . The primary form of teleological ethics is called utilitarianism. . . . Utilitarianism and teleological ethics are used interchangeably.” Rae, *Moral Choices*, 17, 84–85. Similarly, Geisler notes: “Ethical systems can be broadly divided into two categories, deontological (duty-centered) and teleological (end-centered). Christian ethics is deontological. Utilitarianism is an example of a teleological ethic.” Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 24. See also Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 27–28.

There are many practical benefits of consequentialist systems of ethics, such as avoiding the supposed strictness of deontological systems, a perceived ease and simplicity of application (e.g., just determine the greatest good), and the popularity of consequentialism in the public square,²¹ as well as the ability ostensibly to make moral judgments apart from divine revelation or even the need for a belief in God. Indeed, consequentialist theories abound, including ethical egoism (egoistic utilitarianism), which teaches the right choice is the one that advances one's own self-interest; ethical universalism (altruistic universalism), which holds the correct path is the one that produces the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people; epicureanism (hedonistic utilitarianism), which posits the correct choice is the one that produces the most pleasure; situationalism (idealistic utilitarianism), which teaches the right thing to do is to take the path that upholds a given ideal; and there are many other manifestations of consequentialism.

Yet, despite the popularity and apparent benefits of this approach to morality, there are a number of significant limitations to consequentialist systems of ethics. For example, consequentialism relies heavily on man's ability to perform what Geisler calls the "utilitarian calculus."²² To elaborate, within this approach to ethics man must be able to predict accurately the results of a given action in order to provide moral guidance. Yet, since humans are not omniscient, it seems the only sure way for a consequentialist system of ethics to operate is retrospectively.²³ Such an approach, of course, is impractical and raises questions about the real usefulness and viability of consequentialist moral systems. Indeed, while consequentialism could possibly describe how man *did* live, it appears it cannot answer the fundamental moral question Schaeffer posed, "How shall we *then* live?"²⁴

A second related challenge for consequentialist systems of ethics is that for any given action there are a myriad of results, some

²¹ Frame observes, "Utilitarianism seems to be almost routinely assumed in contemporary discussion of ethical issues." Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 97.

²² Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 31. Cf. John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 282. In referring to a "utilitarian calculus," Geisler seems to be playing off of John Stuart Mill's advocacy of a so-called "hedonistic calculus." Cf. Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*.

²³ Frame observes, "It turns out, then, that utilitarianism though advertised as a simple and practical method for evaluating courses of action, in fact requires divine omniscience." Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 99.

²⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Shall We Then Live?* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1979).

immediate and others in the distant future. Regarding this challenge Davis observes: “Human beings have an imperfect ability to fully anticipate the consequences of a given action. . . . The long term consequences of a given action may be especially difficult to foresee.”²⁵ Moreover, even if advocates of a consequentialist approach to ethics were able to identify correctly all of the results of a given action (which is doubtful), a related concern is mankind’s ability to evaluate properly such consequences. The issue here, which Douma refers to as the “principle of measurability,”²⁶ is the prospect of identifying good and bad results relying solely on the criteria within the moral event itself. Indeed, it seems that in order to make moral judgments, consequentialist systems must use deontological moral principles—that is, prior concepts about right and wrong. As Rae has observed: “The utilitarian must appeal to [deontological] principles to determine what constitutes a good or harmful consequence. What makes an outcome harmful or beneficial depends on a prior commitment to [deontological] principles.”²⁷ Taken at face value, then, consequentialism does not appear to be internally coherent.

Historically, the way consequentialism has operated is that the presiding authority is privileged with the position of defining good and bad for a given moral event. Concerning personal ethics this authority can be oneself; in regard to societal ethics, the authority is usually those in power—or, at least, those with power. Such arrangements, however, can lead to serious problems. For instance, on a personal level consequentialist systems can become myopic and result in incongruent concepts of good and bad between different individuals. On a societal level utilitarian moral arrangements have proven disastrous, resulting in the endorsement of all varieties of injustice, ranging from environmental destruction to ethnic cleansing. Frame refers to this as the “swine trough” objection to utilitarianism—that is, the observation that a consequentialist approach to ethics allows for the justification of all types of

²⁵ Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 282. Frame writes, “To measure the consequences of an action, we would have to trace its effects into the indefinite future and throughout the universe. One action, after all, can have enormous effects, years later and miles away.” Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 98.

²⁶ Douma, *Responsible Conduct*, 10.

²⁷ Rae, *Moral Choices*, 87. Likewise, Geisler writes, “Even utilitarians take the end as a universal good, showing that they cannot avoid a universal good. Otherwise from whence do they derive the concept of a good that should be desired for its own sake?” Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 37–38.

deplorable acts as long as such acts are in the interest of the majority or at least the authority.²⁸ Moreover, this objection highlights the inability of consequentialist systems to protect minorities, as well as its failure to account for individual merit.²⁹

One final limitation of consequentialism is that on a personal level such an approach to ethics is not inherently satisfying. To elaborate, experience testifies that acting in one's own self-interest is not always fulfilling, especially given the perspective that comes with the passage of time. In fact, oftentimes embarking on a course of action that requires great personal sacrifice—including the giving of one's finances, one's time, and even one's own blood, sweat, and tears—can be satisfying. This is so because mankind is made in the image of God. While the *imago Dei* is surely a complex theological topic, for the purposes of the present discussion, it can be simply noted that, in part, image-bearing involves acting like God.³⁰ This functional aspect of the *imago Dei* is clearly emphasized in the creation narrative, as well as elsewhere in Scripture, for mankind was commanded to act like God (cf. Gen 1:26–28; Ps 8:3–8). Just as God is sovereign over all, so in the first chapters of the Bible God's image-bearers are commanded to have dominion over the creation; just as God is a creator, so God's image-bearers are told to procreate. True morality, then, involves functionally bearing God's image, not acting consequentially so as always to fulfill one's own interests or to satisfy an anthropocentric concept of good. Moreover, since the Lord made man to do what he told him to do (i.e., keep his commands), one would expect utilitarian-type ethics to be unfulfilling.

Deontological Theories

IN CONTRAST TO UTILITARIANISM, DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES make ethical judgments based on the morality of actions themselves. When evaluating a moral event within a deontological system of

²⁸ Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 98.

²⁹ Rae claims that in secular society, "The most common charge against utilitarianism is that it cannot protect the rights of minorities." Rae, *Moral Choices*, 86, 88.

³⁰ While a thorough discussion of the *imago Dei* falls beyond the scope of this work, helpful resources include G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); and Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

ethics, moral praise or blame is assigned based on the conformity (or lack thereof) of specific actions to prescribed morals. As such, deontological theories are usually described as action-based ethical systems. The term *deontological* is derived from the Greek word *deon*, which is usually translated *duty* or *obligation*. Therefore, deontological theories are often called duty-based ethics.

While deontological ethics focus on actions and moral norms, it is important to note, as the Feinbergs do: “Deontologists do not ignore consequences altogether. They only claim that consequences are not the basis for deciding the moral rightness or wrongness of an action.”³¹ To elaborate, given that the Lord is benevolent toward mankind and biblical norms are a reflection of God’s character, it is logical to conclude that moral acts will produce good consequences (cf. Gen 4:7). While this is true, a potential problem with this equation is that the good produced by moral actions is not always immediate, nor is man always capable of evaluating divinely defined good.³² Indeed, many moral choices require self-sacrifice and/or a degree of suffering.³³ While Christians can affirm that in God’s economy “all things work together for the good” (Rom 8:28; cf. Heb 12:11), it is difficult to construct a utilitarian ethic based on human perception of this process. In sum, then, while consequences are relevant within deontological moral systems, as Davis has observed, it is best to view the results of moral events as “secondary considerations.”³⁴

³¹ Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 28. Similarly, Geisler observes: “Christian ethics does not neglect results. Simply because results do not determine what is right does not mean that it is not right to consider results. Indeed, results of actions are important in Christian ethics.” Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 25.

³² Man’s inability to define good eternally and theistically—in fact, man’s tendency to define good temporally and selfishly—can lead to a skewed view of morality and evil. As Frame observes in his defense of a so-called greater good theology: “It is important for us to define *greater good* theistically. The greater good should be seen, first of all, not as greater pleasure or comfort for us, but as greater glory for God. . . . Unless God’s standards govern our concept of goodness, there can be no talk of good or evil at all.” John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 171.

³³ For a fuller treatment on the doctrine of suffering, see my chapter on the topic entitled “The Biblical Teaching on Suffering” in David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth and Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 107–22.

³⁴ Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 281. Note the Feinbergs’ description of their own deontological ethical system: “It is not that we think God is disinterested in consequences. In fact, we think his nature inclines him to act in his creatures’ best interests. Moreover, we hold that if his commands are followed, the creatures’ best interests will be served.” Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 30. Rae writes: “It is important to take the consequences of actions and decisions seriously. . . . Consequences may force us to realize that

In the formal study of ethics deontological moral systems are not as numerous as those that are consequentialist in orientation; nevertheless, several noteworthy ethical theories fall into this category. The two most significant deontological systems are divine command theory and natural law theory, which is sometimes called ethical rationalism. Divine command theory holds that God has commanded what is moral and what is immoral.³⁵ Biblical ethics is an example of a divine command moral system. Natural law theory, which has recently enjoyed a renaissance of sorts among Protestants,³⁶ teaches that humans either innately know what is moral and what is immoral, or they can glean such knowledge from means embedded within the created order. Natural law theory, which will be briefly discussed in the following chapter, looks to general revelation as a source for moral principles, whereas divine command theory appeals to special revelation. Both divine command theory and natural law theory, then, make ethical judgments based on the conformity of actions to revealed moral norms.

Source of Moral Authority

IN THE AFOREMENTIONED WORKING DEFINITION OF biblical ethics, it was noted, “Biblical ethics is the study and application of the morals prescribed *in God’s Word*.” Within the system of biblical ethics, then, the Word of God is the source of moral authority—that is, in

sometimes there are exceptions to our deontological principles.” Rae, *Moral Choices*, 88. In describing how consequentialist and deontological systems are related, Douma appears to go too far as he asserts: “We should choose neither utilitarianism nor deontology as the basis for our ethics. Our conduct must be deontological, but never one-sidedly so. We always look at and weigh the benefit, as utilitarians do.” Douma, *Responsible Conduct*, 28.

³⁵ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* defines *divine command theory* as follows, “The name applied to any moral system or theory in which central moral elements are related directly to the commands of the deity.” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1986), s.v. “divine command morality.”

³⁶ While natural law theory has been a staple of Roman Catholic moral thought, Protestants have traditionally neglected this approach to ethics. This tendency, however, appears to be changing. Examples of recent Protestant studies of natural law theory include: J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); and David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Also of note is the work of Protestant turned Roman Catholic, J. Budziszewski. Budziszewski’s readable texts on natural law, both of which were written prior to his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, include, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), and *What We Can’t Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas, TX: Spence, 2003).

biblical ethics Scripture is the origin and wellspring of moral norms. All ethical systems, whether deontological or consequentialist in orientation, have a source of moral authority. Indeed, a source of moral authority is a critical component in ethical evaluation, as it will both inform the standards of conduct in a given moral system and, as will be explored in the ensuing discussion, speak to the life-orientation of system participants.

Actual forms or expressions of sources of moral authority vary among ethical systems. For example, one can look to a written law code as a source of moral authority, one can make an unspoken ideal a source of moral authority, or authority can be vested in the directives of an individual—including oneself, one’s leaders, or even God.³⁷ Yet, while sources of moral authority abound, Rae notes that all sources of moral authority can be classified under two broad headings: human constructions or transcendent sources.³⁸ Moreover, taking a historical perspective, Rae observes, “The major figures in the history of ethics can be grouped into [these] two primary categories.”³⁹ As examples of those whose source of moral authority is a human construction, Rae cites Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Bentham, and Mill. Rae’s examples of transcendent source ethicists include Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant.⁴⁰ While sources of moral authority can be packaged up differently, every ethical system gets its moral standards either from a supernatural source or from man.⁴¹ The difference between ethical systems that rely solely upon a human construction for moral authority and those with a transcendent orientation is great, for with an anthropocentric source of moral authority, ethics are subjective, created, and changeable, while with a divine source of moral authority, ethical standards are objective, discovered, and unchanging.

³⁷ See the Feinbergs for a thorough discussion of differing sources of moral authority, which they group into reason-based systems, prescription-based systems, and relation-based systems. Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 24–27.

³⁸ Rae, *Moral Choices*, 12–13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ One ought not to confuse the *source* of moral authority with the *agent* of moral authority. For example, God invests his moral authority in man. This may be expressed in the example of a father exercising authority over his children or a pastor exercising authority over his church (cf. Eph 5:22–6:9; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7). In fact, even in regard to secular authority, there is a sense in which this is true as Paul notes such rulers are “God’s servant[s] for your good” (Rom 13:4). Additionally, note that Jones has a brief discussion of authority that is derived from divinely ordained structure and the need of right exercise of such authority. Cf. Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 154–55.

Summum Bonum

AMONG OTHER REASONS, THE SOURCE OF moral authority within an ethical system is important, for it will ultimately determine the *summum bonum*, or highest good, of system participants. In other words, the source of moral authority within a moral system will indicate whom the system is designed to please. For example, biblical ethics has God's Word as a source of moral authority. Since the Bible reveals God's glory, the *summum bonum* of biblical ethics is the glorification of God. This transpires as system participants are conformed to God's image as they keep his moral standards. In a secular system of ethics such as ethical egoism, which teaches the right choice is the path that advances one's own self-interest, the *summum bonum* is self-glorification. The concept of *summum bonum*, then, which has long been a topic of discussion among both secular and religious ethicists,⁴² is important, for it introduces the idea that ethical evaluation involves more than just the acts that are committed. As will be explored shortly, events that qualify for moral evaluation always involve conduct, character, and goals. The process of ethical evaluation, then, must incorporate the *summum bonum* of participants in moral events. The *summum bonum* is inherently tied to the source of moral authority in an ethical system.

The earlier observation that sources of moral authority can be logically reduced to two—namely, God and man—has profound implications for moral evaluation. Indeed, assuming freedom of choice and ability,⁴³ this observation means moral defenses such as

⁴² See Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 17–18; Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 28. Also, in an often overlooked ethics text, Cornelius Van Til has a lengthy discussion of the importance of the *summum bonum* of ethical systems. Van Til writes, "In a most general way we may say that God is man's *summum bonum*." Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 41. See pp. 41–121 for Van Til's entire discussion.

⁴³ The idea and parameters of free will are topics theologians have debated for centuries. As the concept is commonly understood, at a minimum having a free will entails the ability to choose freely from among available options given one's ability. As theologians have debated free will, two general positions have emerged. Some have espoused the idea of a so-called "volitional free will," which is the understanding that people are free to choose from the available options. Others have adopted a wider view, holding a so-called "libertarian free will" or a "contra-causal free will." This is the idea that humanity's will is completely free—that is, free to choose any option. Of course, there are a myriad of hybrid views and other options. Regardless of one's position on this complicated topic, though, ethicists have long affirmed that intention or volition is a nonnegotiable component of moral evaluation. In other words, in order for moral praise or blame to be assigned, one must act with free will (however, it is defined within one's theological system). Indeed, even secular civil laws recognize accidental or forced acts should not be evaluated in the same way as are intentional acts. For more information on this topic, especially as it relates to salvation, see: R. C.

“The Devil made me do it” are not valid excuses for immorality; for whether consciously or not, participants in moral events always act with a *summum bonum* in mind. So, while the Devil may introduce temptation into a moral equation (cf. Gen 3:1–5; 1 Thess 3:5), ultimately free moral agents make the choice to act morally or immorally. In so doing, the *summum bonum* of the moral agent is revealed. Given the two ultimate sources of moral authority in view, the *summum bonum* will be either pleasing God or pleasing man—usually oneself. Within the system of biblical ethics, to act morally is to have God as the source of moral authority and his glorification as the *summum bonum*. To act immorally is to have man as the source of moral authority and the glorification of man as the *summum bonum*.

While it is perhaps a bit peripheral to the present discussion of biblical ethics, the concept of *summum bonum* raises the interesting question of whether a system of ethics that has man as its source of moral authority can ever produce purely benevolent, altruistic acts. In other words can a nontheistic, secular system of ethics ever not have the glorification of man as its *summum bonum*? For the sake of the present discussion, Christians can at least affirm the following. First, as was previously reviewed, the testimony of Scripture regarding natural man’s moral abilities reveals a bleak picture, at best (cf. Gen 6:5; 8:21; Isa 64:6; Luke 18:19; John 15:5; Rom 8:8). Second, experience testifies that unregenerate men have the ability to perform seemingly meritorious acts. As Jesus even observed, “You then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children” (Matt 7:11). Yet, note good works, such as the giving of gifts to children, are not morally praiseworthy if they are done for immoral reasons (e.g., as a precursor to child abduction). Indeed, Augustine taught such good works are nothing more than “splendid sins.”⁴⁴

As the question of unregenerate man’s ability to act in a benevolent manner is set aside, consider the following narrative from Josiah Gilbert Holland’s *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*. In this text,

Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); David Basinger, ed., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985); and Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary: Critical, Practical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments* (Toledo, OH: Jerome B. Names, 1884), 347. See Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007).

which was the first biography of President Lincoln published after his death, Holland recounts an occasion on which Lincoln was ruminating about his own moral ability to act in a completely altruistic, selfless manner, apart from Christ. Holland writes:

Lincoln was riding by a deep slough, in which, to his exceeding pain, he saw a pig struggling, and with such faint efforts that it was evident that he could not extricate himself from the mud. Mr. Lincoln looked at the pig and the mud which enveloped him, and then looked at some new clothes with which he had but a short time before enveloped himself. Deciding against the claims of the pig, he rode on, but he could not get rid of the vision of the poor brute, and, at last, after riding two miles, he turned back, determined to rescue the animal at the expense of his new clothes. Arrived at the spot, he tied his horse, and coolly went to work to build of old rails a passage to the bottom of the hole. Descending on these rails, he seized the pig and dragged him out, but not without serious damage to the clothes he wore. Washing his hands in the nearest brook, and wiping them on the grass, he mounted his gig and rode along. He then fell to examining the motive that sent him back to the release of the pig. At the first thought, it seemed to be pure benevolence, but, at length, he came to the conclusion that it was selfishness, for he certainly went to the pig's relief in order, as he said to the friend to whom he related the incident, to "take a pain out of his own mind."⁴⁵

Moral Pitfalls

REGARDLESS OF ONE'S VIEW OF MAN'S natural ability to act altruistically, most Christians would agree an ethical system that has God as its source of moral authority puts one in a better position to act in a God-glorifying manner than do competing ethical systems. Following a moral system such as biblical ethics, however, does not guarantee that one's *summum bonum* will continually remain theocentric. Indeed, while believers may affirm "man's chief end is to glorify God,

⁴⁵ Josiah Gilbert Holland, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, MA: Gurdon Bill, 1866), 78–79.

and to enjoy him forever,”⁴⁶ all too often advocates of Christian moral systems such as biblical ethics fall prey to distractions that put self in the place of moral authority. These distractions or moral pitfalls of biblical ethics abound, yet three are prominent: personal emotions, past experiences, and perceived practicality.⁴⁷

As an example of the moral pitfalls of biblical ethics, one could consider the issue of divorce and remarriage. While the ethics of divorce and remarriage vary among evangelical Christians,⁴⁸ for the sake of the present discussion, assume one believes that Scripture forbids divorce and remarriage in all circumstances.⁴⁹ It is one thing to hold this position intellectually, yet if an advocate of this position found his son or daughter in a difficult marriage, there may be an emotional temptation to adjust one’s ethics in order to satisfy the pragmatics of the moment. This would be especially true in a context where divorce in the case of a difficult marriage is accepted both by the culture and by the community of faith. Or consider the moral issue of ordaining women into the pastorate. If someone was converted under the ministry of a female pastor or evangelist, such an experience would likely influence one’s interpretation of passages such as 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:9–15. Of

⁴⁶ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer 1.

⁴⁷ While the biblical ethicist views emotions, experiences, and pragmatic intentions as moral pitfalls, secular ethicists have built entire moral systems around these ideas. For example, “Emotivism is the view that the primary element in the meaning of moral judgments consists in their function of expressing the emotions or attitudes of the speaker.” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1986), s.v. “emotivism.” See also, the explanation and critiques of emotivism in Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 82–84; Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 32–35; and Rae, *Moral Choices*, 88–89. An example of a moral system built around perceived practicality is pragmatism, which is “considered by many to be America’s most important contribution to philosophy.” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1986), s.v. “pragmatism.”

⁴⁸ Several surveys of the various positions are available. For example, see H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1990); Mark L. Strauss, ed., *Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); and Bruce Vawter has a shorter yet well-written summary of the major views of divorce and remarriage in “The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5.32 and 19.9,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16 (1954): 155–67. For the author’s personal view on the ethics of divorce and remarriage, see David W. Jones, “The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165, no. 1 (Jan. 2008): 68–85. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 223–38.

⁴⁹ The idea that Scripture prohibits divorce (in the sense of the dissolution of a marriage) and remarriage is the historic view of the church from the cross until at least the sixteenth century. See Gordon J. Wenham and William E. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002); and Henri Crouzel, *L’eglise primitive face au divorce du premier au cinquième siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971).

course, it is not possible to separate emotions and experiences from ethical evaluation. Indeed, even if it were possible, it would not be advisable, for emotions and experience are parts of being human. Therefore, within biblical ethics the goal is not to divest oneself of emotions, experiences, and/or pragmatic intentions.⁵⁰ Rather, the challenge is not to let anything trump the Word of God and become the conduit through which self usurps the place of moral authority.⁵¹

Given the fallen state of the human heart, however, even with a theocentric system of ethics in place, it is difficult to avoid the moral pitfalls that usher self into the place of moral authority. Indeed, it seems believers often find themselves in situations where there is a temptation to make an ethical decision based on an anthropocentric motive or rationale rather than on the Word of God. Moreover, given the degree of man's depravity, believers usually become aware they have made such self-centered choices only in retrospect. How can this be avoided? In answer to this question it may be noted the ability to remain faithful to Scripture increases with sanctification. Yet, beyond this general observation, two more specific suggestions can be offered. First, a practical way to discern one's source of moral authority in a given situation is that moral choices tend to be defended in the same manner in which they are held. For example,

⁵⁰ Frame has an excellent and lengthy section in which he calls for more emphasis being placed on emotion in Christian systems of ethics. While he recognizes the fallacy of letting emotion usurp the place of moral authority, nevertheless Frame chides Protestant ethicists for marginalizing emotion. See Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 370–82. Likewise, Douma calls for Protestants to place a higher emphasis on emotion, writing, “The good moral act is unimaginable apart from the emotional involvement of the person who acts.” Douma, *Responsible Conduct*, 19–20. See, also, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1986), s.v. “emotion;” and *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (1995), s.v. “emotion.”

⁵¹ The writings of eighteenth-century revivalist John Wesley are particularly instructive in this regard. While he did not write a systematic theology or ethics text, a reading of Wesley's sermons reveals that he identified four sources of moral authority: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This is the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” a term coined by the twentieth-century American Methodist Albert C. Outler in his introduction to the 1964 collection of John Wesley's writings entitled *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). It is interesting to note Outler's remarks as he later reflected on his creation of the term *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. Outler lamented: “There is one phrase I wish I had never used: the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It has created the wrong image in the minds of so many people and, I am sure, will lead to all kinds of controversy.” Paul Wesley Chilcote, “Rethinking the Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” *Good News Magazine* (January/February 2005), n.p. The problem to which Outler is alluding is the tendency of some readers to view the four pillars of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as equal sources of moral authority. For Wesley, Scripture was the only true source of moral authority and the lens through which tradition, reason, and experience should be viewed.

if one's immediate reaction to a contrary moral stance is unrighteous anger,⁵² then it is possible that the original ethical position was based more on one's emotions than on Scripture. Conversely, if one's stance on a moral issue arises from a careful study of the Word of God, then it should be possible to articulate winsomely such a view even in the face of opposition and calmly (albeit sometimes passionately) to dialogue with those who hold dissenting opinions.

A second suggestion that may help identify or reveal one's source of moral authority in a particular scenario is the ethical formula: stated belief, plus actual practice, equals actual belief. To elaborate by way of example, a believer may confess a belief that embezzlement is wrong because the Word of God prohibits stealing. Yet, if this same person cheats on his taxes, then (at that moment, at least) he does not actually believe stealing is wrong, nor is the Bible his source of moral authority, for indeed the Word of God prohibits stealing. Concerning the dynamics behind this scenario, the testimony of Scripture is clear, "For as [a man] thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov 23:7 NASB; cf. 27:19), and in regard to one's actions Jesus taught, "For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. . . . But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart" (Matt 12:34; 15:18). In other words, the actions of a man betray his heart; the externals expose the internals; profession shows confession; and ethics reveal theology. In sum, then, by observing the way moral positions are defended, as well as the congruity (or lack thereof) between stated beliefs and actual practice, believers can monitor their own source of moral authority and return to the Word of God when necessary.

Conduct, Character, and Goals

IN THE WORKING DEFINITION OF *BIBLICAL ethics* given earlier in this chapter, it was noted, "Biblical ethics is the study and application of the morals prescribed in God's Word that pertain to the kind of *conduct, character, and goals* required of one who professes to be in a redemptive relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ." As has been

⁵² Anger in and of itself is not immoral. While Scripture does classify anger as a work of the flesh (cf. Gal 5:20) and warns believers about the dangers of unrighteous anger (cf. Eccl 7:9; Matt 5:22; Rom 12:19; Eph 4:26; Col 3:8), nevertheless, there are many examples of righteous anger in the Bible. Examples include Jesus (cf. Mark 3:5), Moses (cf. Exod 32:19), and Nehemiah (cf. Neh 13:25), among many others.

touched upon in this chapter, biblical ethics is not just concerned with practice but also with the person and the purpose of moral events. In the assigning of moral praise or blame within the system of biblical ethics, this focus on conduct, character, and goals is what C. S. Lewis referred to as considering the three parts of morality,⁵³ Frame calls having a tri-perspectival approach to ethics,⁵⁴ Beach and Niebuhr refer to as the “triadic relation” of ethics,⁵⁵ and Bahnsen labels the three basic perspectives in decision making.⁵⁶ Indeed, within the Protestant tradition most ethicists have engaged in moral evaluation by considering conduct, character, and goals.⁵⁷ In fact, a focus on the three parts of morality can even be seen in the ethics chapter of the most famous of all Protestant confessions of belief, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The *Confession* speaks of good works being done with a “heart purified by faith [i.e., right character] . . . done in a right manner [i.e., right conduct] . . . to a right end, the glory of God [i.e., right goal].”⁵⁸

It may be helpful to think of the three parts of morality as three points on a triangle that represent a single moral event. The first corner of the triangle corresponds to conduct (i.e., the “practice” of moral events), which is deontological in orientation and focuses

⁵³ Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 69–73. In his trademark conversational tone, Lewis avoids the terms *conduct*, *character*, and *goals* and refers to the three parts of morality as: (1) relations between man and man, (2) the things inside each man, and (3) relations between man and the power that made him.

⁵⁴ Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 33–36. Frame’s terminology for the three parts of morality is somewhat confusing as he uses differing nomenclature for non-Christian and Christian moral systems. In reference to non-Christian systems, Frame refers to the deontological tradition, the existential tradition, and the teleological tradition. In regard to Christian ethics, Frame refers to a normative perspective, an existential perspective, and a situational perspective.

⁵⁵ Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 5.

⁵⁶ Cf. Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard: The Authority of God’s Law Today* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), 78–84. Bahnsen’s labels for the three parts of morality are the normative approach, motivational approach, and consequential approach.

⁵⁷ Another example is theologian Samuel E. Waldron. In his exposition of the ethics chapter of the 1689 *London Baptist Confession*, Waldron writes that a good work must have “the right *root* (it must proceed from a heart purified by faith); the right *manner* (God’s work must be done in God’s way) and the right *end* (the glory of God must be its ultimate end).” Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1989), 212. Jones refers to the direction, the motive, and the goal. Cf. Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 5. Van Til’s terminology for the three parts of morality is the standard, the virtue, and the ideal. Cf. Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, 125. O’Donovan refers to the objective order, the subjective order, and the end of the moral life. Cf. Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5.

⁵⁸ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 16.7.

on external acts and behavior. Conduct usually deals with relations between man and man. The second corner of the triangle stands for character (i.e., the “person” of moral events), which is ontological in orientation and focuses on motives and internal disposition. Character deals with the things inside each man—that is, man’s self-relations. The third corner of the triangle represents goals (the “purpose” of moral events), which is teleological in orientation and focuses on design or intended end. In biblical ethics goals deal with relations between man and God. Consideration of any one corner of the triangle—that is, any one part of morality—apart from the others will provide insufficient information in order to engage in informed, responsible, ethical evaluation. Perhaps this idea can be communicated by conceiving of the three parts of morality as being three circles in a Venn diagram (see chart 1.1). Within this rubric, moral events transpire in the area of the diagram where the three circles of conduct, character, and goals overlap.

In his classic work *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis emphasized the importance of considering conduct, character, and goals in ethical evaluation. In his chapter entitled “The Three Parts of Morality” Lewis gave the following illustration:

There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from

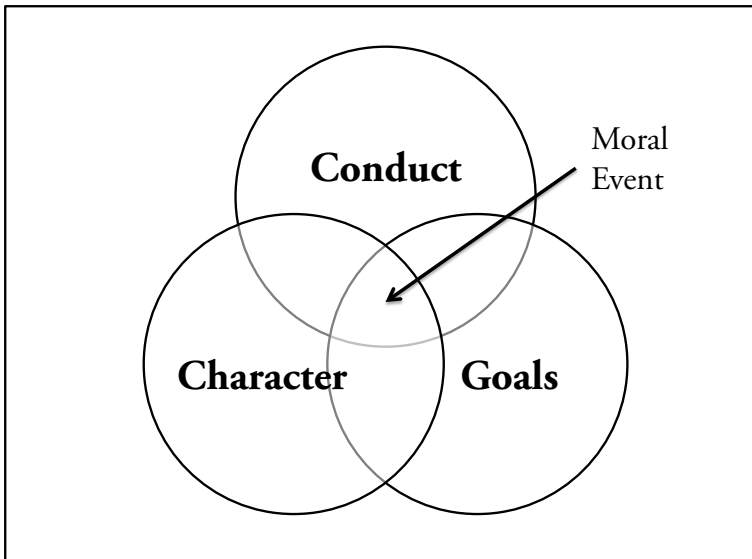


Chart 1.1

one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual—when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea plainly if you think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another's way; and secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions. . . . But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to. . . . And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta. Morality, then, seems to be concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonizing the thing inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for: What course the whole fleet ought to be on.⁵⁹

As was previously noted, both in the formal study and in the casual practice of ethics many people tend to focus on conduct.⁶⁰ Indeed, this is natural, for conduct is quantifiable and may be legislated, while character and goals are intangible and difficult to evaluate—even within oneself (cf. 1 Cor 4:1–4). This is why conduct is

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 70–71.

⁶⁰ Recently, there has been an increase in Christian scholars who have sought to emphasize character in moral evaluation. While such thinkers are in the minority, their works are instructive. For example, see Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2002); Stanley Hauerwas, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Commentary of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Joseph J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

the level upon which moral and legal judgments are usually made in the public square. Yet, as has been observed, to limit moral evaluation solely to conduct will inevitably result in ethical distortions such as legalism and license, among others. Moreover, truncating morality to the assessment of conduct, apart from a consideration of character and goals, not only is unorthodox but also will leave one unable to explain certain portions of Scripture. For instance, to cite just a few examples, ethical systems that are solely based on conduct cannot explain why:

- Murder is prohibited (cf. Exod 20:13), yet capital punishment is prescribed (cf. Gen 9:5–6; Rom 13:4).
- Premarital sex is immoral if done consensually (cf. Deut 22:25–27) but not immoral for the violated party if it occurs against one’s will (cf. Deut 22:23–25).
- Eating meat sacrificed to idols is both allowed (cf. 1 Cor 10:25–26) and prohibited (cf. Rom 14:6, 15, 21; 1 Cor 8:13; Rev 2:14, 20).
- Under Old Testament civil law, usury was forbidden in dealings with Jews but permitted in transactions with foreigners (cf. Deut 23:19–20).⁶¹
- The prophet Balaam was commanded by God to accompany the Midianite princes (cf. Num 22:20) but then was nearly killed by the Lord for doing so (cf. Num 22:22–35).
- Paul circumcised Timothy (cf. Acts 16:3) but refused to circumcise Titus (cf. Gal 2:3)—both in view of his Jewish onlookers.
- Truth-telling is normative for the Christian life (cf. Col 3:9), yet truth that is not spoken out of love can be sinful (cf. Eph 4:15, 25).

Given most people’s default, conduct-based moral systems, the idea that the same act could be either moral or immoral seems tenuous at best. Yet, in regard to conduct, Paul taught, “I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean” (Rom 14:14; cf. Rom 14:20; 1 Tim 4:4;

⁶¹ Readers interested in moral information on the topic of usury are directed toward my text on the topic. Cf. David W. Jones, *Reforming the Morality of Usury: A Study of Differences that Separated the Protestant Reformers* (Lanham, MD: University of America, 2004).

Titus 1:15).⁶² In understanding this concept it is important not to confuse conduct with moral events. For example, murder and capital punishment both entail the same conduct—that is, the willful taking of human life. Yet certain assumptions about character and goals are loaded or incorporated into the terms *murder* and *capital punishment*. To elaborate, *murder* is defined as the malicious taking of human life—that is, murder consists of the willful killing of another human being out of anger (or wrath, jealousy, selfishness, etc.) in order to satisfy one's own sense of justice. *Capital punishment*, however, is understood to be the plaintive taking of human life by the state in obedience to God's law, out of respect for the image of God, as an expression of divine justice. Therefore, both murder and capital punishment involve the same conduct—that is, the purposeful taking of human life—however, considered in isolation, this conduct is neither moral nor immoral in and of itself. The character and goals of the moral agent, along with the conduct, provide one with the information necessary in order to assign moral praise or blame for moral events.

Several words of warning, however, are in order. First, in saying conduct, isolated from other factors, is neither moral nor immoral, the reader ought not to understand that behavior such as adultery could ever be considered ethical. This is so because adultery is not just conduct, but rather adultery is a moral event that involves the conduct of sexual intercourse, willfully engaged in by individuals of corrupt character, done with the goal of self-glorification. Consequently, adultery is always immoral. While the corrupt human heart may be convinced adultery is engaged in for meritorious reasons, this could never be so. The moral event of adultery is prohibited in Scripture; thus, it can never be committed for the glory of God. Second, in moving the locus of assigning moral

⁶² Another example of this concept comes from Jesus' interchange with the Pharisees and scribes about their tradition of hand-washing. Mark records on one occasion the religious leaders asked Jesus, "Why don't Your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating bread with ritually unclean hands?" (Mark 7:5). In his response Jesus instructed his disciples by asking, "Are you also as lacking in understanding? Don't you realize that nothing going into a man from the outside can defile him? . . . What comes out of a person—that defiles him. For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, evil actions, deceit, promiscuity, stinginess, blasphemy, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a person" (Mark 7:18, 20–23). In other words, Jesus taught the conduct of hand-washing (or the lack thereof) was neither moral nor immoral. Rather, as Christ shifted the illustration from hand-washing to speaking, the conduct, character, and goals of an individual defile or not.

praise or blame away from a legalistic focus on conduct, there exists the risk of opening up a Pandora's box of moral license. This error is committed when conduct is completely eliminated from the moral equation. Biblical ethics, however, seeks to incorporate conduct, character, and goals in understanding moral norms without neglecting any one of the three parts of morality.

Conclusion

BIBLICAL ETHICS IS THE STUDY AND application of the morals prescribed in God's Word that pertain to the kind of conduct, character, and goals required of one who professes to be in a redemptive relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. This means biblical ethics is deontological in orientation, as it focuses on the conformity of moral events to divine moral norms. Furthermore, biblical ethics looks to the Word of God as its source of moral authority. Within the pages of Scripture, biblical ethics draws its substance. Finally, biblical ethics seeks to incorporate conduct, character, and goals in the assignment of moral praise or blame. Biblical ethics holds that moral norms are more than just legalistic, wooden rules that govern action. Indeed, moral norms are comprehensive life directives that speak to the whole person and have the glorification of God as their goal.

Summary Points

- Biblical ethics is the study and application of the morals prescribed in God's Word that pertain to the kind of conduct, character, and goals required of one who professes to be in a redemptive relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The distinctives of biblical ethics include:
 - Being built on an objective, theistic worldview.
 - Being the natural result of merit imputed by God rather than a means of earning merit with God.
 - Seeking to recognize and to participate in God's moral order already present within the created order and in special revelation.
 - Affirming that immorality stems from human depravity, not primarily from man's ignorance of ethics or from socioeconomic conditions.

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- Incorporating three elements of a moral event: conduct, character, and goals.
 - Two main types of ethical systems exist:
 - Consequentialist or utilitarian ethics, which assigns moral praise or blame based upon the end results of a moral event.
 - Deontological ethics, which makes ethical judgments based on the morality of actions themselves when evaluated for conformity of the actions to prescribed morals.
 - Scripture is the source of moral authority for biblical ethics.
 - The source of moral authority will determine the *summum bonum*.
 - Moral pitfalls related to the source of moral authority include personal emotions, past experiences, and perceived practicality.
 - Conduct, character, and goals are the three parts of morality.