

# Ethics

## Lesson Three

### **Guideposts to Christian Ethics and Moral Choices**

As Bible believing Christians, our ethics and moral choices are derived from very specific categories:

The first category of ethics and moral choices is our Christian worldview. This will determine the decisions we make to manage our lives. Therefore, we have to be wary of worldviews that are not in agreement with New Testament Scripture. They are all around us. These will try to influence our morality and thus, our behaviors. Much of the world has turned God's view of ethics upside down. Just turn on the TV, read newspapers, internet blogs or listen to a conversation in any public gathering. In all of this, God's guideposts for ethical living remain constant. We are given them in His Word; and also, can be directed by the ever present leading of the Holy Spirit.

*Romans 8:14 (ESV)*

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*

*John 16:13 (ESV)*

*"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."*

The second category is human behavior found in the Bible. It gives us both improper and sinful, or proper and normative examples for Christian living. These examples in Scripture, good or not good, will speak to you. God will give you discernment to determine one from the other. When you have a close relationship with Him, you will find He gives you all the guidance you need to make God-pleasing, moral choices.

The third category is found in the biblical imperatives from Scripture. These are commands that mandate, guide and instruct our attitudes and actions. They are not suggestions. They are ageless divine commands, given for our well-being and safety. They show us the way and guide us *"into all truth."* They define the particulars of our "walk," or how we are to live. The Latin term, "sola scriptura," which is translated in English as "Scripture alone," refers to the Bible as being the sole infallible source of authority for guiding our walk with God.

## 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV)

*“All Scripture is breathed out by God [the Holy Spirit] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, {17} that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*

Our Christian ethics are defined and should be regulated through the lens of universal biblical truths. We must defer to and be guided by these truths. All other culturally practiced ethics must fall in line with these truths. Scriptural imperatives should be the guideposts by which we make our life's choices. Bible truths need to be our measuring rod of righteous living, above anything else.

God universally (or supraculturally) looks at the question of ethics in very specific ways:

- First, He looks for the things we do that honor Him and His Word.
- Second, God is always aware of those things we may have accepted as ethical and honorable in our particular cultures. He will ask us to look into our hearts, saying, “Do your ethical choices qualify as honoring Me and My Word, regardless of your situation?” Our guidelines to answer His question should never be subject to the world's influence. Keep your choices under the scrutiny of whether they are pleasing to God. Therefore, let's be aware and careful of our ethical beliefs and choices.
- Finally, God sees many of the ways we live as ethically neutral. God makes no judgment about these. For example, much of what we eat or how we generally make a living would be ethically neutral to God. (There are certainly clear exceptions to this.) God asks us to discern what is ethically neutral and not make man-pleasing doctrines or choices out of them that will capture our hearts, denying us our freedom in Christ.

I recall receiving a phone call some time ago from my dear friend, Dr. Keith Pettus.<sup>1</sup> We talked about the radical changes in ethics and the loss of honor in America. We agreed that everywhere he and I look, it's apparent that people have ignored or redefined what used to be considered ethically honorable. Today, many believe that ethics are without absolutes. Instead, ethics are now driven by a sense of emotionally defined justice. This has led to a constant

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cultural battle between God's view of righteousness and what is for some people, a deliberate and/or often uninformed ignorance of God. There is a price to pay for this. The Lord alone has the ultimate say in the consequences or outcomes of everyone's attitudes and actions. For those of us who know Jesus as Lord and Savior, we should sorrow over how much of our world lives today. Such are the times in which we find ourselves. Ethics has been redefined to be what they never were, never should be, and in God's eyes, never will be.

There used to be a sense of shame that accompanied what were considered culturally dishonorable, unethical acts. People were afraid of discovery and disclosure. They felt conviction, knowing that what they were doing was unacceptable and deemed immoral. Now, all this has changed. So many cultural taboos have now been discounted or rejected as out of date or irrelevant. A new set of ideas and behaviors has found its place as the new ethical standard and measure of morality. For vast numbers of people, this ungodly way no longer carries any sense of shame, guilt or remorse. It's a source of carnal pride and is displayed loudly and often.

"A lie doesn't become truth, wrong doesn't become right, and evil doesn't become good, just because it's accepted by a majority."

Washington Irving

Today, we are bombarded with misdirected, misinformed rules of social engagement and enforced social correctness. In many cases, these offer a false sense of invulnerability. Sin is inherent in this assault on our ethics. Sin is always unstable, destined to fail and bring a fall to the sinner. It's a foundation made to crumble under the weight it tries to uphold. Make no mistake; sin and its blatant disregard for God, sits precariously in the sands of dishonor and ethical error. It awaits the inevitable tidal wave of God's holy judgment. In the midst of all of this self-serving, self-directing way of living, the Word of God stands as a timeless, unchanging beacon or guidepost of light. Its immutable truths beckon the world to redemption. Unfortunately, so many people have blinders on, refusing even to consider what this Gospel light might reveal to them.

What I have offered so far is not a pretty picture, but it's accurate. Consider it a wakeup call for us, as God's people. We are to carefully measure our lifestyles and the ways we present ourselves to the world around us. Matthew 5:14 tells

us we are God's *"light of [and to] the world."* We are that city on a hill that cannot and must not be hidden. This is a declaration of our Christian identity. It is inseparable from our ethics, which come straight from the heart of the Lord. It defines us, as it illuminates how we're to navigate this sin-darkened world.

*Matthew 5:16 (ESV)*

*"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

## **An Ethical Perspective**

The New Testament was written from a worldview and ethical perspective that distinguished itself from what was commonly embraced in the first century culture. This is not true for the institutions of power in today's world. Depending on a person's religious and moral views, or lack of them, ethics can take on meanings that are ultimately destructive, when not in agreement with both the Old and New Testament writers. Why is this important to us? What's the difference? The answer directly falls into the arena of biblical imperatives and truths. These show the way, guiding us into a position of "right-standing" before God. It's reasonable to assume that if there can be "right-standing" before God, denial of these biblical imperatives and truths can guide us into a condition of "wrong-standing" before God. This is a fork in the road. Will we choose living with eternal success before God... or it's opposite - living with the prospect of inevitable, eternal failure. It's a sobering thought. A student of Scripture understands this.

As you can see, righteous ethics and moral choices should always flow from God, not from the opinions of others. Early in our Christian walk, we learn that success for a Christ-follower requires an uncompromising commitment to biblically defined and mandated ethics. Any other system of ethical commitment, and especially when it stems from political correctness, or an exaggerated social Gospel... or humanist thinking is wrong. These will lead to the inevitable fall of the cultural structures that are intended to keep us safe, secure and to offer us opportunity.

We are not to ignore the injustices of today. We must be determined to be people who strive for a just life for every member of our society. As you reflect on this, you should see that doing what's right in the eyes of our holy God is a

fail-safe formula for wholeness, integrity and freedom. This will serve us well as a signpost leading to wisdom, discretion, and understanding.

*Psalm 84:11-12 (ESV)*

*“For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. {12} O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!”*

*Psalm 37:5 (ESV)*

*“Commit your way to the Lord, trust Him and He will act.”*

## **Ethically Bound**

This story is true. I have protected the place and identities of those involved. It's the ethical thing to do. Many years ago, a missionary pastor, was invited to work overseas with an indigenous denomination. This pastor accepted the invitation and soon began a multi-cultural international church under the denomination's authority. In time, he had a successful, growing congregation who loved him. He felt particularly strong about teaching them the Bible and helping them to adopt God's Kingdom culture, even when it meant that some things had to change.

The congregation flourished and grew. Habits and patterns of living that had traditionally held them back were displaced with newfound ways of living. They embraced the biblical principles the pastor taught them and it made a difference in the ethics that defined their lives. It was a cultural shift and surely pleased God. The pastor took care to affirm all the good ethics of their indigenous culture but was firm in his teaching, showing them a better way to live in harmony with God's design for His Kingdom.

One day, the pastor was instructed by the denominational leaders to have his congregation participate in a fund-raiser. Everyone would be required to sell jewelry that would be provided by some visitors to the nation. The prices were high and the visitors providing the jewelry said they would receive all the money and at the end, give the denomination a good commission.

Upon examining samples of the jewelry, the pastor knew they were nothing but cheap knockoffs. Immediately, he knew it was a scam. The lack of ethics and character of these visitors was obvious. They were taking advantage of the naiveté of the local people. What was the pastor to do? He knew his church was an integral part of the denomination and every other church would be participating in the fund-raising. He also knew the people who bought the jewelry would be buying junk, and they would never see the money promised to them. What should he do? He was concerned not to disrespect the leaders and elders of the denomination.

The pastor decided that he had only one option. Honoring the ethics of the Kingdom of God demanded that he protect the people God had given him to shepherd. He accepted whatever the consequences might be, perhaps even losing his position and having to return home from the mission field. His priorities were clear. He announced to his church that they would not be participating in the fund-raiser. He insisted there would be no exceptions. He did this carefully, without putting the denomination or its leaders in a bad light. He was ready to pay the price for honoring God and his people.

The outcome is not the point of the story. In light of his need to honor God to his best ability, the choice this missionary pastor made, at whatever it may have cost, is the ethical point. It's the only point!

Do not be surprised when your Christian ethics are demeaned as evil in today's fallen, God-denying world. You must look beyond the culturally driven new normal of today's world to the eternally ethical normatives of the Bible. Let them undergird and strengthen your resolve to live a life that pleases God, even at the expense of your reputation, or the acceptance by others, and the inevitable scorn and persecution it will bring.

In Luke 9:23 Jesus said if we were to follow Him, we would have to deny the advantages that agreement with the world's ungodly ethics would bring us. We would have to submit to His requirement to take up a cross of sacrifice and do our lives His way. Yes, He knows this is not the easy path, but it's the right one. It's the only one grounded in ethics of eternal, unchanging value. You may have to set aside your feelings to consider this. If so, remember, it's from God's heart to yours, because He loves you and wants the best for you and those whom you influence daily.

Honoring God-approved ethical choices will be an ever-increasing and certainly challenging battle. It's ultimately fought between our fallen human nature (our flesh) and the spiritual condition we find ourselves in as born-again believers. The battleground for this fight is always the mind. If we're to win this battle for a righteous, ethical life, we must begin with a basic understanding of the need to bring *"every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."*

### *2 Corinthians 10:3-6 (ESV)*

*"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. {4} For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. {5} **We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,** {6} being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete."*

To be ethically bound to the truths of the Bible will be a choice that gives the world evidence of our position in Christ. It may have consequences, but the issue is not what the consequences might be. It's always about doing what is right... and letting your life display what you know is the truth, not what someone else feels is truth. Let what God reveals to you in His Word *"guide you into all the truth."* (John 16:13 ESV) It's the only unfailing guidance you will ever need.

## **God-pleasing Ethics**

A great example of some of the universals (or supracultural norms) that define Christian ethics can be seen in God's command to Abram to leave his country, abandon his ungodly culture of idol worship, and journey toward the promised land. (Genesis, Chapter 12) This land would eventually be filled with Abram's descendants, who at the time, were uniquely God's chosen people. From them would come the birth of Jesus in a humble stable. He would define ethics for us from God's immutable, loving and perfect view.

The ethical battles God's people subsequently faced over the following centuries, even up to now, provide us with a wealth of historical understanding of the ethical tensions we must navigate through. The Bible's historical narratives and prophetic accounts of the Israelites illustrate that ethics will define people, whether the ethical principles are right or wrong before God.

People do not define ethics. For Christians, we understand the Bible is our guidebook to navigating the ethical tensions we face. Our guidance is not to come from somebody's opinion, theory or social construct. It's solely up to God to make that call.

## **Ethics and Culture are Inseparable.**

Now, let's unpack a definition of "culture." This will help us move toward a better understanding of how ethics are ingrained into every culture, even the culture of the Kingdom of God. This has enormous implications, since ethics drive the behaviors of every social group, from smallest to largest. Ethics will be the deciding factor in any society's movement, either toward godliness or away from it. Freedictionary.com defines "culture" in these two ways:

1. "The act of, or any labor or means employed for, training, disciplining, or refining the moral and intellectual nature of man; as, the culture of the mind."
2. "The state of... enlightenment and discipline acquired by mental and moral training." (This begs the obvious question, "Who is the trainer?")

These definitions restrict "culture" to acts accomplished through human effort and coming from a state of intellect. They leave God out of the equation. Merriam Webster, another secular publication, still leaves God out of equation. It enlarges the understanding of "culture" to picture how groups of people living with each other function, and are identified. Here's a sampling of its definitions.

1. "...the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group... the characteristic features of everyday shared by people."
2. "[a] set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices [and a] set of conventions, or social practices"

If you try to describe the world's cultures without adding biblically ordered ethics, you describe an empty, or at the most, a limited existence. Biblical ethics must be the foundation of any secure, free culture. They are the only ethics that are without partiality. They carry no prejudices and provide safe boundaries and guiding principles for equal opportunity, health, fairness and respect for all.

## **The Risk of Relativism, People-Pleasing or Self-serving Ethics**

Situational ethics, which we discussed in Lesson One, is also referred to as "relativism." It is not bound by absolutes. Its principles and behavioral options



are without constraining limits. They may change with the next popular idea. “Relativism” judges people by whatever social context or construct fuels it in the moment. Those groups that hold power have to be approving or the ethics of the hour will be deemed invalid. “Relativism” or situational ethics cannot give us an absolute, fully dependable personal code of conduct. If it feels good today, relativism says it’s valid to do it. This denies the Bible’s eternal imperatives for righteous living.

It's clear that a multitude of philosophies, and even many Christian theologians, past and present, ascribe to situational, people-pleasing, or self-serving ethics. Common among the justification for this is the idea that any action is valid if it serves what may be called “the common good.” Can you see the problem? Who decides the common good? ...Good is really not “common,” it’s always exclusive.”

The proponents of this ethic take a view that the Scriptures are not inerrant or fully inspired. Therefore, the individuals, cultures and societies (and sadly, many churches) that hold this view are not accountable to anyone but the crowd they join with in agreement. Biblically stipulated ethics must be our guide to living. As Christians, we are commanded to follow Christ and His Word.

As we have seen, when ethics are fluid, moving with the tides of public opinion, they will rely on feelings, wants and felt needs. They will lack accountability to anything greater than a person or group’s own selfish desires. Galatians 5:19-21 describes this as *“the works of the flesh.”* Fluid ethics lack Godly wisdom. They are vulnerable to the inherent weaknesses of human judgment. James 3:16 describes the results of ethics without accountability as *“disorder and every vile practice.”* James shows us it’s apparent we all need *“wisdom from above”* to navigate life’s ethical jungles.

*James 3:13a 16-18 (ESV)*

***“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. {14} But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. {15} This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. {16} For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. {17} But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. {18} And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”***

This ends the third lesson on Ethics.