

# Exploring Christian Ethics

## Biblical Foundations for Morality

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## Preface

*P*lanes, barber chairs, and dentist offices are the worst, but it occurs in many other situations where I am thrown together with strangers. They ask me what I do for a living, and for a split second I am tempted not to speak the truth, because when I reveal that I teach Christian ethics I often get drawn into a conversation about ethical issues. Don't get me wrong; I love to talk ethics. It is what I do for a living. The reluctance comes from the fact that so many people that I meet lack the concepts, vocabulary, and framework that would give our conversation some common ground.

In such situations, people will often ask my view on an issue, and I quickly become frustrated over my inability to communicate it because we do not share a common ethical vocabulary or a common biblical worldview. For example, in conversations about capital punishment, I usually divide my objections into deontological and utilitarian considerations. But most people are unfamiliar with these basic ethical categories. More importantly, it is quite difficult to explain to someone who is not familiar with Scripture why I oppose capital punishment. This is not simply because they may not know *the particular passages* that mention capital punishment, but because they may not be familiar with the larger biblical context into which I want to place my views.

This unfamiliarity with both secular and biblical ethics is not restricted to people I meet in public places. I find the same to be true of many of the young Christians I teach in my ethics courses and even of the older Christians I teach in adult church school. Many of them lack the conceptual and biblical tools to articulate clearly their ethical views. All Christians know that the Bible is an essential resource, but when it comes to formulating a coherent ethical framework they are often confused about how to use the Bible responsibly. They are often at a loss as to the overall theological and moral narrative that holds the Bible together, so they resort to pulling verses out of the Bible and trying to apply them to their lives.

This book is designed to provide a basic overview of ethical theory and biblical ethics. The goal of this book is not to provide answers to modern ethical dilemmas faced by Christians. (For those persons already conversant in ethical theory and biblical studies, there are other fine works available.) The reason I do not take this approach is twofold. First, it is usually the case that applicable portions of Scripture need to be read within the larger scope of the Bible, and many Christians are unfamiliar with that larger narrative. Second, the Christian life is greater than the sum total of answers to moral quandaries. Being a Christian involves the development of a particular kind of character. And the shape of that character is determined by the story that we tell about God's ongoing journey with human beings from the beginning of time until the end of time. To live the Christian life, we must learn to see the world through the lens of the Bible, the book that tells that story.

For these reasons, I have not divided the book into particular issues in ethics such as human sexuality, war, medical ethics, and the like. I do discuss such issues as violence, sexuality, family, and wealth, but always and only within the larger biblical story. To do otherwise runs the risk of leaving the reader with only fragments of a larger picture. For example, readers will have a very truncated view of Jesus' attitude toward wealth unless they understand his pronouncements within the context of such broader biblical themes as sin, covenant, the image of God in humanity, idolatry, and the kingdom of God. Failing to understand the larger theological context is like building the upper floors without a strong foundation.

*Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality* is written for those Christians who want the foundations necessary to begin formulating a biblical worldview. I have written it for people with little or no background in theology or ethics. I try to keep the technical jargon to a minimum and to avoid entering into long discussions with other thinkers. This book seeks to guide those who wish to develop a strong biblical foundation for doing ethics and living the moral life.

Part 1 begins with an introduction to basic ethical theory, because Christian ethicists share certain concepts, vocabulary, and approaches with other ethicists. But even when dealing with commonly shared concepts such as egoism, deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue, I seek to present them from a Christian perspective.

Part 2 of the book is devoted to an exploration of the biblical resources for creating a Christian moral framework. After an entire chapter examining the various ways in which Scripture can be used in Christian ethics, we will explore those sections of the Bible that have been most influential in shaping the Christian worldview in relation to morality and ethics: creation and fall,

the Mosaic covenant, the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, the life of Jesus, and the letters of Paul.

Each of us is a small but important part of the great pilgrimage of God with human beings that began at the creation of the universe. My hope is that this book will help you understand the larger journey that constitutes God's past and present covenant relationship with human beings. If we can understand the broad outline of God's journey with us, we are in a better position to do the kinds of things and develop the kind of character that God expects of traveling companions.

PART 1

Introduction to Ethics

## Chapter 1

# Exploring Christian Ethics

*T*he Bible is full of journeys of exploration. God called Abraham, the father of Judaism, to leave behind all that was familiar in order to journey to a strange and faraway land. The earliest Christian disciples were called to leave their families, jobs, and homes in order to journey with a charismatic preacher named Jesus of Nazareth.

In the following pages, we will be embarking on a journey of exploration into the world of Christian ethics. All of us are moral beings. Day in and day out we engage in behaviors and patterns of thought, feeling, and action that have a profoundly moral dimension. For some of you, these ways of acting, thinking, and feeling were shaped by your upbringing in a Christian household; others of you have grown up in different moral worlds. Whether it is vaguely familiar or strange and new, together we will explore the moral landscape of the Christian faith. An explorer is not simply someone who inhabits a particular world, but someone who examines and questions it. Explorers seek the truth through investigation. You need not be the first person to ever step foot in a land to be an explorer. You are trying to discover the truth for yourself. This book will act as a guide in that land. Ultimately, however, you must make your own discoveries and decisions about the truth. This should not be a merely intellectual journey. If you read this book without reflecting on your own morality, then you are merely a tourist and not an explorer.

The best explorers have some common characteristics. First, they remain open to new discoveries. Especially in the study of ethics, it is all too easy to think that we already know the answers. The best explorers embark on their journeys with a willingness to be transformed and to have their assumptions challenged. Second, explorers ask questions. Geographic explorers might ask, “Where does this river lead?” Scientific explorers might ask, “What will happen if I mix these two chemicals?” I will be your guide through this land, but do not simply take my opinion or anyone else’s as the final word. Feel free to

question, disagree, and raise counterpoints. Although I may know the lay of the land a little better, I am not the final authority; I am an explorer just as you are. Third, great explorers develop maps or larger theories that help provide a broader vision. As we journey together, you should seek to understand the larger picture of Christian ethics. What are the most important “landmarks” in Christian ethics? Love? Imitating Jesus? Forgiveness? Justice? Purity? Obedience to the commands of God? Good explorers try to place all their findings within a broader understanding. Finally, effective exploration requires a combination of discipline and imagination. Discipline is required if we are going to think seriously and systematically. Much of this book is designed to get you to think more carefully about morality and ethics. Whereas most people have opinions about moral issues, few persons stop to explore their own views carefully. But we also need moral imagination, ways of thinking about an issue or biblical passage in new and exciting ways. While great explorers are disciplined in their exploration, they are also willing to take some chances and go down unknown paths. You, too, should take some risks by exploring ideas and ways of thinking that are unfamiliar.

### Why Go on This Journey?

I have referred to this book as a “guide” in your journey. Let me switch metaphors. One purpose of this book is to look at the *grammar* of ethics. Every day, you use the language of ethics: right, wrong, good, bad, virtuous, obligation, duty, compassion, jealousy. This is the language of ethics. One purpose of this book is to get you to look more carefully at the way you use that language, to help you clarify how you employ such terms and concepts as “right” and “duty” and “good.” We will discover together how ethical terms and concepts relate to one another so that you can learn to be more precise in your ethical thought and language, just as grammar lessons help us become better speakers of our own language.

A second purpose of this book is not simply to examine the grammar of your everyday moral language, but to familiarize you with what might be called a “second language”—namely, the moral vision and language of Christian Scripture. We will hear this language spoken by the words and actions of such figures as Moses, Amos the prophet, the psalmist, Paul the apostle, and most importantly, Jesus of Nazareth. It is my hope that after reading this book you will be better able to speak the language of Christian ethics, because for Christians the ultimate goal is to make this language their native tongue and therefore to act, think, and feel as Christians.



Learning the Christian language is vital to living as a Christian. Until we can learn to speak the Christian language we will not be able to see the world through the lens of the Christian faith. This language will contain familiar terms such as “virtue,” “compassion,” and “justice.” Yet these terms might be understood differently within a Christian context. And then there will be new and unfamiliar vocabulary: image of God, covenant, kingdom of God, Decalogue, purity, and the like. By learning this language we will begin to enter into the thought-world of the biblical writers.

To summarize, one goal of this book is to help you examine your own use of moral language and concepts so as to become more aware of how you make ethical decisions. The second goal is to become familiar with the main tenets of Christian ethics. For those of you who are actively involved in a Christian church, these two might be closely connected.

## Types of Ethics

As we begin our journey, it is helpful to be familiar with some common ethical distinctions that will clarify our thinking. Ethicists divide the field of ethics into three branches: descriptive, prescriptive or normative, and metaethical.

1. *Descriptive ethics* is not geared toward asking what people *ought* to do or how they *should* feel. Rather, it is concerned primarily with discovering how people actually behave, think, and feel in relation to morality. “Public support for capital punishment in America is declining.” This is an example of descriptive ethics because it is a purely descriptive statement. “The decline in support for capital punishment is unfortunate given that capital punishment is right and necessary.” This second statement moves us out of the realm of mere description because it is judging the morality of such a state of affairs. It moves us into normative ethics because we are making moral judgments about what is right and wrong.

As beginning ethicists, you should be on guard against falling into two very common traps whereby you make *normative* claims from *factual* evidence. For example: “Most Americans support capital punishment for murder, therefore capital punishment for murder is morally right or defensible.” This is a very common mistake. Unless one is a complete relativist, the popularity of a position does not *determine* its moral rightness. You may have a greater burden of proof if you stand in stark opposition to commonly held morality, but the fact that something is widely held as moral or immoral does not make it so.

A second trap usually takes some form of the following: “It may be right for people to do X, but nobody ever does, so we should not say that X is a

duty.” For example, “There is nobody who wouldn’t defend himself or herself against attack, so pacifism is wrong.” Once again, we find a confusion of normative and descriptive ethics. If one is engaged in trying to establish goals or rules to live by, it is not enough simply to say that people do not generally act this way. The purpose of normative ethics is to set standards, even if those standards appear stringent or even unattainable by most people.

2. *Prescriptive or normative ethics* is the type of ethical inquiry that “prescribes” certain actions, behaviors, or modes of feeling and thinking. It seeks to establish “norms” for acting, thinking, and feeling. A norm is a rule. It is not simply what is “normal,” but what “ought” to be. When we engage in normative ethics we are seeking to establish the right or good ways of acting, thinking, or feeling. Most of what we will do in this book is normative ethics. We will be asking not simply how people do, in fact, make moral decisions and shape their moral identities, but rather how they *ought* to do so. I will be proposing certain rules, ideas, and virtues that *should* shape the Christian life. For example, we will be examining what Jesus said and did and how his teachings and ministry ought to shape our lives as contemporary disciples.

3. *Metaethics* involves the investigation into how people use moral language and the ways in which they go about making ethical decisions. Metaethicists ask such questions as “What is the meaning of the word *ought* or *must* or *good* or *wrong*?” How do people use such terms? How do people go about deciding what makes an action right? In this way, metaethics is somewhat abstract. Philosophers who engage in metaethics are like grammarians; they are primarily concerned with how moral terms are used and how they fit together to make moral sentences. This field also includes questions of moral epistemology (how we *know* right from wrong). The discussion of deontology and utilitarianism in chapter 2 is a metaethical one.

### Levels of Normative Ethical Inquiry

Much of this book deals with normative ethics because it focuses on the question “How ought Christians to act, feel, or think?” Throughout the book we will try to maintain a balance between two closely related aspects of normative ethics: *decisionist* and *virtue*.

#### Decisionist Ethics

*Decisionist ethics* focuses on the question “What ought I to *do*?” It often deals with situations of moral perplexity. Moral perplexity emerges when we are

confronted by two or more courses of action and we are unable to decide which is the right one. This is often called “quandary ethics” because it deals with moral quandaries or moral dilemmas.

### Virtue Ethics

*Virtue ethics* is a type of normative ethics that downplays the importance of particular tough decisions in favor of an examination of the characteristics or virtues that a good person develops and displays. This approach to ethics deals not simply with moral quandaries or instances of moral perplexity, but with the question “How ought I to *be* or *live*?”

Virtue ethics seeks to establish a model of the “good life.” The “good life” does not mean what it means in modern America, namely, a life of financial and physical well-being. The good life, as the focus of so much ancient Greek and Roman moral philosophy, is that for which human beings are designed, the manner of living that most fully fulfills our function as human beings. For example, is it better to live a life of study and contemplation, or a life of activity? Is wealth or poverty incompatible with a properly lived human life? Is it better to raise a family, or serve humanity by remaining single? Should one even worry about other human beings? Should one try to live in a simple manner?

Virtue ethics also seeks to answer the question “What kind of person should I be?” What kinds of characteristics or virtues make a good person? Humility? Generosity? Mercy? Joyfulness? A sense of humor? The moral life is about developing a certain kind of character that is certainly reflected in actions but is not reducible to a set of actions or positions on tough issues.

Finally, virtue ethics also addresses the question “How does the good person *respond*?” Throughout this book, I contend that a major part of becoming a moral human being is learning to respond to things in the right way. So much that happens in our lives is beyond our control. A loved one hurts us. Do we respond with anger or forgiveness? Someone else gets the job we thought we deserved. Do we respond with resentment or humility? We see someone else in pain. Do we feel pleasure or compassion? Emotional responses, far from being outside of our control and thus beyond the pale of morality, are a central feature of the moral life. How we respond to both the blessings and the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” is arguably a better barometer of our moral character than where we come down on abstract issues or hypothetical dilemmas.

Virtue ethicists remind us that moral inquiry should not focus merely on how we act in situations of great moral difficulty or what we think about tough moral quandaries such as abortion or capital punishment. Ethics involves the

kinds of persons we are and how we respond emotionally to the daily events of our lives. What is the good life? What is a good person like? How does a moral person respond? These are central questions. How you deal with particular moral quandaries will depend a great deal on the kind of person you already are. Therefore decisions, character, and visions of the “good moral life” are closely intertwined.

Throughout this book I will seek to strike a balance between decisionist ethics and virtue ethics, between an emphasis on decisions and a focus on broader questions about the virtues and the good life.

### Christian Ethics

Although the category of “Christian ethics” did not emerge until about three hundred years after the death of Jesus Christ, the earliest Christians were deeply concerned about ethics and morality.<sup>1</sup> One reason that so many early Christian writers focused their writings on ethics was the need to refute false accusations against Christians raised by their non-Christian neighbors. Many of these early defenders of the faith (called “apologists”) were less concerned with showing that Christian doctrine was logical and believable than with demonstrating the *moral* superiority of Christianity over paganism. Non-Christians accused early followers of the Christian Way of being irreligious because they did not sacrifice to the pagan gods.<sup>2</sup> Other accusations against Christians ranged from incest (a misunderstanding of calling one another “brother” and “sister”) to cannibalism (a misunderstanding of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper). But more importantly, they accused Christians of being immoral:

Is it not then deplorable that a gang . . . of discredited and proscribed desperados band themselves against the gods? Fellows who gather together illiterates from the dregs of the populace and credulous women . . . and so organize a rabble of profane conspirators, leagued together by meeting at night and ritual fasts and unnatural repasts . . . they despise temples as if they were tombs; they spit upon our gods; they jeer at our sacred rites; pitiable themselves, they pity (save the mark) our priests; they despise titles and robes of honour, going themselves half-naked!<sup>3</sup>

Modern Christians may find it ironic that a society that engaged in infanticide and gladiatorial games viewed Christians as morally suspect. But it is clear that one reason early Christians were so concerned with ethics was in response to such attacks.

The concern with living the proper life was not merely a reaction to outside criticism, however. Morality is central to the very core of the Jewish and Christian belief systems. Let us turn for a moment to those Judeo-Christian faith commitments that led Jews and Christians to place such a great emphasis on living a life not just of right belief but of right action, disposition, and attitude—a life where both the “hands” and the “heart” are carefully regulated and cultivated. I will expand on these faith claims later in the book. For now I will simply highlight them.

At the risk of oversimplification, the Christian universe consists of three components: God, the created world, and human beings. Faith claims about each of these contribute to the overall Christian emphasis on morality and ethics. Put differently, it is what Christians profess to believe about God, human beings, and the created world that makes ethics so central to Christianity.

### God: God Acts in History, and God Is Just

Let us begin with two claims that Christians make about God that make morality so vitally important: (1) Yahweh is a God who acts in history, and (2) Yahweh is moral.<sup>4</sup> The God revealed in Scripture is a God who acts. For those of us raised in the Christian tradition, this seems self-evident. But it was not always so. Many people in the ancient world believed that God created the world and then simply set it on its course, much as a watchmaker builds a watch and then lets it run, without interfering with its workings. But Deism (as this view is called) is contrary to what Christians believe. It contradicts the witness in the Old Testament of events such as the exodus, where God intervened to save the Israelites from their Egyptian captives. More importantly, it is contrary to the very foundation of Christianity, namely, the incarnation (or becoming “flesh”) of God in Jesus Christ, who was a particular human being *in history*.

The Christian confession that God acts in human affairs is a warrant for Christians to take seriously what happens in this world. In other words, we have a God who is concerned not simply with “heavenly” or “spiritual” things, but with the daily events of this earth. Therefore, we are also called to be concerned with things of this earth: with whether people have food and clothing, with what we do with our bodies, with whether outsiders are treated with dignity and respect, and so forth.

But it is not enough simply to say that God acts in history. Ancient Romans also held that their gods (Jupiter, Apollo, etc.) acted in history. But in contrast to these gods, Christians worship a God who is absolutely just and unimaginably compassionate—in a word, *moral*. Yahweh is a God who intimately

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cares for real people in real situations. The God of the Bible is no theoretical God of the philosophers who sits alone thinking God's own inner thoughts. No, the God revealed in Scripture enters into the messy world of human life and wills and demands justice:

For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.  
(Isa. 61:8)

Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.  
(Ps. 24:8)

The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.  
(Exod. 34:6–7)

Note how many moral characteristics are attributed to God: just, loving, compassionate, gracious, steadfast, powerful, and glorious. This is a far cry from the immoral and petty gods we find in many ancient religions.

Because our God is a just, loving, and compassionate God, *we* are called to be just, loving, and compassionate. In other words, for Christians, there is a profound connection between our worship of God and our treatment of our neighbor. As our exploration of biblical ethics will make clear, how we treat our neighbor is not a distinct or different arena from how we relate to God. Love of neighbor and love of God go hand in hand. In other words, morality and religion are two sides of the same coin. The manner in which we conduct ourselves toward the world and toward our neighbors is part of our worship of God.

### World: The World Is Good but Is Not God

While we will examine this at greater length in chapter 5, for now it is enough to observe that for Christians, the world is considered a *good* place. Despite the sin, injustice, and misery that are so prevalent, the created world is not evil. God loves and cares about the world, and therefore what happens in this world is a concern of God's. God does not care merely about our "spirits";

what happens to our created, material bodies here on earth is also important to God. Therefore, it should be important to us also. It is not enough for Christians to focus on the spiritual well-being of themselves and others; they must tend to the physical care of God's children also. The idea that the world is good is at the very heart of Christian ethics. It is a foundational idea that acts as a warrant or justification for Christians to concern themselves with issues of poverty, hunger, justice, sexuality, warfare, and the like, because all of these involve the real, everyday treatment of the physical.

### Humans: Made in the Image of God but Sinful; Redeemed by Christ

The most foundational claims that Christians make about human beings are: (1) They are created to be in harmonious relationship with God and one another; (2) they have disrupted both of these sets of relationships; and (3) the results of our sin are overcome in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In coming chapters we will see that the first two claims are characterized under the theological headings of "image of God" and "sin." We will also explore the Christian confession that Jesus Christ has come to restore these broken relationships. For now, it is important simply to recognize that the first two claims make morality an important aspect of Christian life. Human beings are created *in order to be* in a reciprocal relationship with God. Their creation was neither accidental nor arbitrary. God has a purpose for creating you and me and everyone who has come before and will come after. That purpose is so that we can gratefully enter into a mutually loving relationship with God that brings glory to God and joy to human lives. As the opening lines of a famous catechism say: "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever."<sup>5</sup> Human beings are not created as slaves or mere robots. God desires to be in intimate communion with human beings while we live on earth and not simply when we go to heaven. A central part of Christian ethics is learning how we are to relate to God.

But we are also created to be in relationship with other human beings. And because we are created for community with others and not simply for lives of isolated autonomy (self-rule), we must discover how it is that we are to properly relate to our fellow creatures with whom we share the earth. Love, capital punishment, wealth, poverty, government, warfare, marriage, friendship—all these ethical issues are central to the Christian life because they touch upon the foundational Christian claim that humans are created to be in relationships of mutual love, concern, and respect with one another.

On the other hand, we have distorted both sets of relationships: our relationship with God and with one another. Our relationship with God is not what

it was designed to be. We rebel against God, make other things into gods, pretend to be gods ourselves, or simply ignore God altogether. Our relationship with our creator is fractured and disrupted.

The same is true of our relationship with our fellow creatures. Whether it be with our parents, our brothers and sisters, our next-door neighbors, our bosses, or our “enemies” in other nations, we have chosen to shatter the harmony and mutuality that God intended. Christian ethics is founded on the belief that while God created us to be in proper relationship with God and neighbor, we have disrupted those primary relationships. Much of Christian normative ethics is a searching effort to discover how to mend our relationships with our neighbors and to live in harmony with them.

### Faith Claims and Ethics

We have spent the last few pages in an initial exploration of some of the most basic Christian faith claims. The rest of this book will expand on these. What is absolutely essential to recognize at this point is the intimate connection between faith claims and ethics. If Christians really do act and feel differently than the rest of the world, if we are at all distinguishable from nonbelievers in terms of morality, it is because of *what we believe* about the universe. Our faith in who God is and what God has done in Jesus Christ transforms us. As Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Because Christians see the world differently, they act differently. If Christian morality has been overrun by secular morality, that is only a symptom. The underlying cause is that many Christians no longer view the world from a Christ-centered and biblical perspective.

We live in a world that downplays the reality of ideas and beliefs, as if only the material, the scientific, and the quantifiable were real. As Donald Luck observes, we need to discover that “as remote and comical as fussing with ideas may seem, ideas are real and very important. They change the world.”<sup>6</sup> The ideas that we maintain about God, the world, and our neighbors largely determine who we are and how we act. If I envision everyone outside my small circle as hostile competitors in a dog-eat-dog world, then I will form my behavior, virtues, and emotions around that belief. If I believe that all poor people are lazy, then that perception determines my behavior and response to poor persons. But if I believe that all persons are made in the image of God, then that faith commitment will shape my actions, feelings,



and virtues. If I believe that God is ultimately in control of history and will one day bring justice and peace on earth, then that faith commitment will shape my actions and attitudes.

As we begin our journey, it is vital that we dig below the surface of what Christians *do* in order to discover the vision of reality that shapes their very being. In your own exploration, continually ask yourself, “How does what I believe affect how I behave, think, and feel?”

### Itinerary for the Coming Journey

*Exploring Christian Ethics* is divided into two major sections. Part 1 will introduce you to some basic concepts and ideas in the field of ethics. These ideas and concepts are common to both Christian and secular ethics. However, we will approach them from a biblical perspective. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the three main approaches to ethics: deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue theory. We begin with some basic ethical theory that is common to Christians and non-Christians because God also works through human reason to guide us. Part 2 moves us to more specifically biblical material. It is my contention that we cannot understand Christian morality or learn the language of Christian ethics without immersing ourselves in Scripture. I therefore begin part 2 with a discussion of the various ways that Scripture might be used in Christian ethics. In chapter 4 we will also briefly examine other sources of Christian guidance such as tradition, reason, and experience. Chapters 5–10 constitute the heart of our exploration, the highlight of our journey, in which we will create a strong foundation for Christian ethics by examining the key source of guidance for the Christian life: Scripture.