

## **Ethics and Divine Lordship**

**“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”  
(Proverbs 9:10)**

### **Introduction**

The discipline of Ethics asks the questions, “How ought we to live our lives?” “What is ‘the good?’” “What is the ground of moral obligation?”

*This class grounds Christian ethics in the character of God. Human ethical responsibility is submitting to God’s Lordship, with God’s Word as the norm, and imitating our loving God as his image bearers. Love is defined in terms of good and is a commitment to glorify God and do good to others. Knowledge of what is good is essential to love others. This can be found in the schema of creation and how God’s original shape and purpose progressively develop in the storyline of Scripture.*

Most of this material is dependent on the work of John Frame, especially his book, “The Doctrine of the Christian Life.”

Frame, John M. Apologetics to the Glory of God. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994.

Frame, John M. The Doctrine of the Christian Life. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008.

Jones, David W.. An Introduction to Biblical Ethics (B&H Studies in Christian Ethics) B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

## 1. The Ground of Christian Ethics: God's Character

- “Euthyphro Dilemma – A conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro, reported by Plato, about the nature of law and its relationship to God” (Jones, 207).

Essentially asks, **is something good** because God commands it? Or does God command something because it's good? If the former, then “the good” is **arbitrary**. If the latter, “the good” **doesn't require God**.

- God is **ultimate reality**, and he is **personal**. God himself is the ground of moral law and is “the good”. God commands what is good, because his character is the good.
  - I Peter 1:14-15 – “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance. But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, **Be holy, because I am holy**.”
  - Moral **obligations** arise in our interactions with **persons**, not with **inanimate objects** like rocks and chairs.
  - We intuitively regard moral law as **transcendent** to changeable human opinions and feelings and **universal** in its application.
  - This moral law is either “**free-floating**” thing untethered from ultimate reality, or it's **grounded** in ultimate reality.

- Ultimate reality is either **impersonal** or **personal**.

## 2. The Knowledge of Christian Ethics: Natural & Special Revelation

- **Natural Revelation**

- “For God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people **who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them**. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, **have been clearly seen** since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:18-21).
- “So, when Gentiles, who do not by nature have the law, do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. They show **that the work of the law is written on their hearts**. Their **consciences** confirm this. Their competing thoughts either accuse or even excuse them on the day when God judges what people have kept secret, according to my gospel through Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:14-16).
- “A third limitation of ethical rationalism concerns **the vague nature of natural law**. Said differently, since natural law must be discerned through general revelation, **it tends to be imprecise** in both its content and its form. This raises the question of whether natural law (or at least man’s perception of it) **is specific enough** to be

useful in ethical formation, especially in regard to addressing **complex moral issues**. Indeed, the apostle Paul hinted at this challenge as he wrote, “**I would not have known sin if it were not for the law**.” For example, I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “Do not covet” (Rom 7:7). So, while general revelation may communicate aspects of moral law, it is questionable as to whether such revelation (i.e., natural law), considered in isolation, is comprehensive enough to be useful in moral theory” (Jones, 38).

“It appears, then, that in order to be useful in ethical formation, **natural law theory** may need to be supplemented by a **more objective form of revelation**—namely, the Word of God” (Jones, 39).

- **Special Revelation**

- The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one’s life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise (**Ps 19:7**).
- God **commands** what is **imitative** of his character.
  - “**Be perfect**, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48)
  - “Therefore, **be imitators** of God, as dearly loved children” (Eph 5:1)

### **3. Three Principles in Ethics: Norm, Goal, & Motive**

- **Deontological:** Emphasizes duty and obligation. These obligations are transcendent or “godlike” and have universal applications.
- **Teleological:** Utilitarianism. A good act maximizes the happiness of people. “A good act does good.” The goodness of an action is calculated by the consequences of the action. But humans would need godlike omniscience to calculate consequences.
- **Existential:** Motivation. A good act comes from good character. Hypocrisy is bad. “Consent Ethics.” But behaviors still need a norm.
- **Non-Christian** ethical theories tend to focus on one of these principles to the diminishing of the others or hold them in tension with the others.
- “In general, ethical judgment always involves the application of a norm to a situation by a person” (Frame, DKG).
  - **Norm** (criteria or standards): Word of God. Glory of God.
  - **Situation** (facts of our experience): God’s Word applied with the glory of God in view.
  - **Existential:** Motives Matter. God’s Word internalized. Delight in glorifying God.
- “Christians can gladly accept all three of the principles .... The God of Scripture is the author of the situation, the Word, and the moral self, so that the three are fully consistent with one another. He ordains

history so that people will find their ultimate blessing in doing their duty. He has made us in his image, so that our greatest personal fulfillment occurs in seeking his glory in history, as his word declares” (Frame, DCL).

- Illustration: Tad sees Scott park his bike and go into the church. Tad desires to be fit like Scott, so he wants the bike.

David assures Tad he can take the bike, so Tad takes it for himself. Technically, Tad took Scott’s property without Scott’s consent. But Tad’s motives were pure when he acted on David’s misinformation.

David’s motives were not pure, however, because David wanted to make Scott sad and mad. Also, David had witnessed Tad bully Scott in the past and wanted to see it again if Scott were to find out Tad took his bike.

Although David didn’t steal Scott’s bike, he contributed to the bike being taken, and was, therefore, in violation of God’s word (stealing and lying). Also, David’s guilt was aggravated by his misuse of power as a deacon.

Although Tad knew intuitively and from the Bible that stealing is sin, he misinterpreted the facts of the situation.

- Many situations are inherently clear to apply the norm, such as killing an innocent person (murder) or engaging in same-sex behavior (immorality).

#### 4. The Content of Christian Ethics: The Whole Bible

- Love to God and love to neighbor.
  - “One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which command is the most important of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these’” (Mark 12:28-31).

“The commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and whatever other commandment—all are summed up by this: Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:9–10; cf. Gal 5:14).

“If you love Me, you will keep My commands” (John 14:15)

“For this is what love for God is: to keep His commands” (1 John 5:3)

- The Law, Story of Redemption, and the New Covenant
  - “In order for Christians, then, to determine what God’s moral law is, we must apply all of Scripture in light of Christ. God’s moral law is not discovered, as covenant theology teaches ... by isolating the Decalogue from the law covenant and then applying it directly to us. Instead, ‘moral law’ is determined from the entire Bible ... by

reading and applying biblical texts to us, first in their covenantal location and then in light of Christ. [D.A] Carson is right to insist:

We do not begin with a definition of moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law but observe (for example) what laws change least, across redemptive history, in the nature and details of their demands, and happily apply the category 'moral' to them. This seems to me to reflect better exegesis and allows space to see the teleological, predictive, anticipatory nature of Tanakh as it points forward to the new covenant and beyond to the consummation."

Taken from Progressive Covenantalism (p. 225). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

- “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law. To those who are without the law, like one without the law—though I am not without God’s law but under the law of Christ—to win those without the law” (1 Cor 9:20-21).

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right. Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may go well with you and that you may have a **long life in the land**. (Ephesians 6:1-3)

Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a **long life in the land that the Lord your God is giving you**. (Exodus 20:12)



## **Introduction**

**1. The Ground of Christian Ethics: God's Character**

**2. The Knowledge of Christian Ethics: Natural & Special**

**3. Three Principles in Ethics: Norm, Goal, & Motive**

**4. The Content of Christian Ethics: The Entire Bible**

## **Conclusion**