



BIBLICAL TRAINING CENTER

February 18, 2018

Making Ethical Decisions

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Big Ideas

Big idea last week: What does it mean that people are moral beings? It means people are able to make choices (i.e., they have free will to “do otherwise.”) Often, there’s a right choice and a wrong choice to make. There are absolute moral laws which come from an absolute moral lawgiver. These laws can be traced to God’s unchanging moral attributes (truthfulness, love/omnibenevolence, mercy). These moral laws are given (prescribed) through special revelation and understood by all people (perceived) through general revelation/nature.

Big idea this week: How can Christians make sure they are following God’s moral laws?

Laws Affecting Christians

Christians might not know it, but there are under many different types of laws. It’s helpful to first understand the difference between them. Christians are affected by three types: (1) special revelation (the Bible), (2) government laws and (3) social norms of the society in which they live. Some/all of these will impact the decisions people make concerning right/wrong.

When there is a conflict between these three, this is the order we should follow:

1. Special Revelation (the Bible is clearest)
2. Government Laws
3. Social Norms

Identifying Cultural Norms & Traditions

Social Norms – Rules, practices or customs of a culture/society that create expected behaviors. We could call these manners or traditions. Some of these could truly be based on what’s right and wrong; others might just be based on tradition and are neither right nor wrong. When trying to figure out right/wrong we must be aware of this.

American social norms:

- Always say “please” and “thank you” when asking.
- When you get into an elevator, turn and face the door and don’t look at people.
- If somebody sneezes, say “bless you.”
- Always flush the toilet after using it.
- Say “hello” and “goodbye” when using the phone.
- Don’t talk with food in your mouth.

Non-American norms:

- If you have a friend turning 25 in Denmark and they are unmarried, ambush them, and throw cinnamon on them all day long.
- Never use salt in Egypt (if you must season your meal, it means you find the taste repulsive).
- Make sure you’re 10-15 minutes late in Venezuela (arriving on time is rude).
- Never play or stab food with chopsticks in Japan.
- Don’t flush used toilet paper—throw it in trash (will break pipes in Latin America).
- Make slurping noises in Japan when eating to complement host.

Religious Traditions – Some of us come from church backgrounds with strong traditions.

These traditions will likely affect our view of right/wrong. It doesn’t matter whether we can defend our position biblically—our parents and friends say they’re wrong, so they should be avoided.

- It’s wrong to smoke tobacco.
- You should never gamble (not even \$20).
- You should never drink alcohol.
- Dancing and watching movies is prohibited.
- Men should not have long hair.
- You cannot listen to certain kinds of music (i.e., rock music).

Again, some of the above could be based on what’s right/wrong. But sometimes, in certain contexts (and moderation), our norms and traditions might just be what we follow without even knowing whether something is truly right or wrong. **We must be careful not to “push laws” on people when the Bible doesn’t necessarily do so** (Romans 14 talks about each should follow convictions regarding observing one day as more holy or not, eating meat, drinking wine).

Government Laws

Governments create and enforce laws to ensure the wellbeing of their people. Examples include: contract laws, labor laws, environmental laws, intellectual property laws, tax laws, and

traffic laws. Christians need to recognize that they are under the “law of the land” in which they live and, therefore, are under certain legal requirements. The Bible says Christians are supposed to submit to their governing authorities:

Romans 13:1–7 (ESV)

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Some examples of government laws:

- Stopping at a stop sign.
- Employees washing your hands in restroom (it would be wrong for them not to, and they can rightly be fired for it).
- Paying income taxes.
- Dogs shall be on a leash.
- Don’t stand on beach bluff.
- Don’t walk across RR tracks.
- Littering.

Special Revelation (the Bible)

The laws above come from natural revelation (reason/nature). Christians believe the Bible to be the Word of God. This means that God has personally revealed more to mankind than what man can know by observing nature alone and reflecting on right/wrong through reason. Therefore, the Bible should always take priority when trying to determine what is right/wrong—because it’s clearer.

It’s easy to say, “Just follow the laws/commands of the Bible!” But when you start to read the Bible in the Old Testament you quickly come across many religious laws that seem strange and foreign to today’s audience. **The question inevitably arises, “Do Christians have to keep ALL of the laws in the Bible? Even the Old Testament laws?”**

Most Christians (rightly) believe Gentiles are not required to keep the Old Testament laws. To understand why, let's look at what we're talking about first, and then reasons why Christians today are not obligated to keep it.

List of Old Testament Laws

See separate handout titled "Sampling of 613 Old Testament Laws."

These laws can be broken down into moral laws, religious laws and civil laws. Moral laws are still binding (and repeated in NT, based on unchanging nature of God). Religious laws were specific to the Aaronic Priesthood (and there has been a change of the law). Civil laws applied to the nation of Israel (and gentiles are not Israel).

Christians are NOT under Mosaic Law

- What "was engraved in letters on stone" has faded away (2 Cor. 3:7) in Christ.
- Christ did this "by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (Eph. 2:15).
- Now that Jesus has come, "we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Gal. 3:25).
- Purpose of OT laws was to reveal need for Jesus: "By deeds of law no flesh shall be justified. For by law is knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20)
- First controversy in church was whether Gentiles needed to become Jewish (Acts 15). Answer was No! Paul gives theological background in Galatians. Law was our tutor to bring us to Christ that we might be made righteous by faith (Gal. 3:23-24).
- Hebrews says clearly that "the law was given to the people" of Israel (7:11), that there was "a change of the law" (v. 12) by which "the former regulation is set aside" (v. 18).

Any benefit to studying Old Testament Law? – Yes! There is a structure to entire Old Testament law system. There are 613 commandments. Two of these are the greatest commandments (love God; love people). Each of the 10 Commandments can be put under these two. The remaining 601 commandments can then go under one/more of the 10 commandments. A more detailed explanation is below:

Matthew 22:37–40 (ESV) ³⁷ And [Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Commandment #1 ("love God") is from Deut. 6:4-5; 10:12; 30:6.

Commandment #2 ("love people") is from Lev. 19:18.

4 of 10 commandments go under "Love God"

1. No other gods before me.
2. Don't make idols.

3. Don't take name of the Lord in vain.
4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

6 commands fall under loving people:

5. Honor your father and mother.
6. Don't kill.
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't bear false witness (don't lie).
10. Don't covet (long/want things).

The remaining 601 commands go under one/more of the Ten Commandments.

The point: All 613 laws can be traced back to a higher moral law, and ultimately to “loving God” and “loving people.” Therefore, it can be worthwhile to study these Old Testament laws, even though we’re not bound by them like the Jewish people under the Mosaic Law.

Christians ARE under New Testament Laws

While Christians are not under the law of Moses, they are under the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Christians are given many moral commands to follow in the New Testament (these number somewhere around *one thousand*). Most of the 10 Commandments are repeated in various forms in the New Testament:

Ten Commandments

1. No other gods before me.
2. Don't make idols.
3. Don't take name of the Lord in vain.
4. Keep sabbath day holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. Don't kill.
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't bear false witness (don't lie).
10. Don't covet (long/want things).

New Testament Command

- Luke 4:8; Luke 14:26; Rev. 19:5
 1 Cor. 10:7,14; Col. 3:5; Acts 15:20; 1 John 5:21
 Matthew 6:9
(Hinted done away: Rom. 14:5; Acts. 20:7)
 Eph. 6:1-2; Col. 3:20
 Matt 5:21; James 4:2; 2:11
 Matt. 5:28; Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 10:8; 1 Thess. 4:2-3; Col. 3:5; Acts 15:20,29
 Eph. 4:28
 Col. 3:9; Rev. 22:15
 1 Cor. 10:6; James 4:2; 1 Tim. 6:10

But we have many more!

Emphasis in New Testament is not **external** but **internal** laws:

- Be sober (Eph. 5:18)
- Be fervent in spirit (Rom. 12:11)
- Be thankful (Col. 3:15)

- Be patient (1 Thess. 5:14; Col. 3:13)
- Be meek and humble (1 Peter 3:15)
- Be loving (1 Cor. 13)
- Be kind (Col. 3:12)
- Be cheerful givers (2 Cor. 9:7)
- Don't be deceitful and hypocritical (1 Pet 2:1)
- Keep a clean conscience (1 Tim. 1:19)
- Don't be bitter (Eph. 4:31)
- Don't be wrathful (Eph. 4:31)
- Don't speak evil about others (Eph. 4:31)

There's also an emphasis on walking in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:5-11; Gal. 5:16). If Christians are yielded to the Holy Spirit, two things will happen:

- **Will have fruit of the Spirit:** love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22)
- **Will avoid works of flesh:** adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like (Gal. 5:19-21)

Following the Clearer and Higher Moral Law

The point of today's class was to show the types of laws Christians are under. When there is a conflict between these three, this is the order we should follow:

1. Special Revelation (the Bible is clearest)
2. Government Laws
3. Social Norms

We will close with an example from Acts.

Acts 4:16–18 (ESV)

A Lame Man is Healed... Peter and John Arrested

¹⁶ [The rulers said,] “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.

¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ **So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.**

Many Signs and Wonders Done

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The Apostles Arrested and Freed

¹⁷ **But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸ they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.** ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰ **“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”** ²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²² But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ²³ **“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.”** ²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. ²⁵ And someone came and told them, **“Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.”** ²⁶ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, **“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.”** ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, **“We must obey God rather than men.**

Bibliography

Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.

Geisler, Norman L. *Systematic Theology, Volume Four: Church, Last Things*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2005.

Rae, Scott. *Introducing Christian Ethics: a Short Guide to Making Moral Choices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

Rae, Scott B. *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009.

Class Schedule

Guidance on Making Moral Choices

DONE Understanding Morality
DONE Making Ethical Decisions
Feb. 25: Genetics and Biotechnology
Mar. 4: Abortion
Mar: 11: War and Morality
Mar. 18: Sexual Ethics

If you know somebody who would be blessed by this class, feel free to invite them; visitors welcome at any time!

Where: Sundays second service (10:45AM) in the upstairs chapel building room C-205B