Living to Please God Part 8   Dr. Lamar Allen

Ethics: Moral principles governing behavior established by an outside source.

Necessity for Ethical Standards: Our focus is on behavior consistent with living life to please God. Behavior flows from thoughts and emotions. Discipline is necessary for success in living life to please God. For discipline to be effective, discipline must be based on a standard acceptable to God. The Christian standard for ethical living was established by God and recorded in Scripture. Two teachings from Scripture historically have been the primary basis for Christian ethics: (1.) The Ten Commandments, and (2.) The Sermon on the Mount.

Ethics, Morals, Values, and Virtues: These concepts concern right and wrong conduct. Ethics is the broadest term. Morals, values, and virtues establish details of an ethic. Usually when people mention "ethical behavior," they mean "good behavior" according to some established standard. Ethical standards may be good or bad relative to the Christian standard established by God.

(1.) **Ethics** refer to rules established by a source outside a person. Ethics usually define acceptable behavior in terms of permitted and forbidden actions. Ethics may be established by codes of conduct defined by religious principles, an organization, or established by some other authority. An ethic may be good or bad.

(2.) **Morals** refer to the guiding principles by which a person lives day-by- day. **Good morals** are guiding principles for right conduct according to an established standard. **Bad morals** are principles permitting conduct which violates an established standard for good conduct.

About morals, Lyndon B. Johnson said, *"You know, doing what is right is easy. The problem is knowing what is right."* Would you agree?

(3.) **Good Values** are principles stating how a person should live, descriptions of what behavior should be according to an ethical standard. H*onesty* as a value means people *should be honest*. **Bad Values** are opposites of good values.

(4.) **Virtues** are good values actually lived out in life day-by day. *Honesty* as a virtue means a person *is honest* in practice. Most people would agree on honesty as a "good value," but not everyone possesses or desires the "virtue" of honesty. Vices are bad values lived out in life and are opposites of virtues. Dishonesty is a vice.

Example: Consider virtues corresponding to values integrity and respect.

 (1.) The value "integrity" has corresponding virtues including openness/candor, honesty, decency, fair-mindedness, sincerity, forthrightness, and incorruptibility.

  (2.) The value "respect" has corresponding virtues including patience, tolerance, politeness, unpretentiousness, friendliness, inclusiveness, considerateness, and courteousness. The opposite of each virtue is a vice.

Mercy: As a virtue, mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm. Adam Smith offered a caution: *"...mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent..."* Do you agree? God mercifully redeems some guilty sinners. Are there innocent unredeemed people? Paul gives the answer in Romans 3:10. ***""None is righteous, no, not one."***

Christian Ethics: The ethic believers are to live by is both commanded and described in Scripture. The goal of Christian ethics is to live mortal life to the glory of God and to ultimately live with God in eternity. What does life lived to God's glory look like? Three things stand out:

(1.) Personal character and behavior are Christ-like. ***"Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son"*** (Romans 8:29).
(2.) Behavior which produces abundant "fruit" for God's Kingdom. ***"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples"*** (John 15:8)***.*** Suitable fruit can only be produced through "Union with Christ." Jesus said, ***"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"*** (John 15:5).

(3.) Obedience which flows from a committed personal relationship with God. ***"But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed"*** (Romans 6:17).

Christians are called to have character, productive results, and behavior which are consistent with God's moral character. This glorifies Him. God's chief concern is the kind of person believers are becoming in their inner being. Outward behavior is important in that it is both an indication of our internal status and a way of contributing to the improvement of that internal status.

Why Should Believers Study Ethics? The task and privilege of honoring God cannot be carried out without Christian ethical behavior. Many New Testament verses tell believers to live in obedience to God's will. John 15:10, ***"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."*** (Also Romans 13:9; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 1 John 2:3-4, 3:22, 3:24, 5:2-3; Revelation 12:17, 14:12).

Romans 12:2 is very explicit, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*** Likewise, Ephesians 5:10, ***"Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord."***

Obedience to these and similar commands requires believers to know and understand the commandments of Jesus, how they apply to them, and how they fit into the pattern of the whole Bible. That knowledge describes Christian Ethics.

As with all Bible study, Biblical ethics should be approached with prayer for guidance from the Holy Spirit who is the ultimate author of the whole Bible. It is wise to approach with humility, earnestly seeking true understanding for the purpose of being obedient in our own life. C.S. Lewis in **Mere Christianity** wisely said, *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."*

Understanding Christian Ethics Requires Study of the Whole Bible: Information must be collected, interpreted, and systematically arranged into ethical topics. Christian Ethics are grounded in God's moral character as revealed in Scripture. The whole Bible contributes to defining which of a believer's possible actions, attitudes, and personal character traits God approves, disapproves, or is neutral about. Christians are obligated to follow God in areas He approves and oppose things He opposes.

Human ethical standards change with time and circumstances, but biblical ethical standards, are based on God's own eternal moral perfection and are timeless and unchanging. Believers are to be holy as God is holy. Leviticus 11:45, ***"For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."*** 1 Peter 1:15-16 ***"as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, *16* since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am***

holy.'" Matthew 5:48, ***"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*** The "perfection" God requires is moral perfection.

Organizing Thoughts About Ethics: Christian Ethics is a complex topic. Wayne Grudem's 2018 book on ethics has 1296 pages. Its title is **Christian Ethics (An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning).** I intended to call the material I am presenting to you "An Introduction to Christian Ethics." But thinking about Grudem's book, I realized what I have time to present is a mere "smattering" of information on the topic.

Grudem follows the pattern of John Calvin, Charles Hodge, and others in using the Ten Commandments as his framework for Christian Ethics. Grudem organizes the material into six ethical decision categories keyed to the commandments. I like his six categories. They are excellent for organizing thoughts on Christian Ethics.

- **Protecting God's honor.** Five of the Ten Commandments deal with protecting God's honor. 1st commandment: ***"You shall have no other gods before me."*** 2nd commandment: ***"You shall not make for yourself a carved image."*** 3rd commandment: ***"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."*** 9th commandment: ***"You shall not bear false witness."*** 4th commandment: ***"Remember the Sabbath day."***
- **Protecting Human Authority.** 5th Commandment: ***"Honor your father and your mother."***
- **Protecting Human Life.** 6th Commandment: ***"You shall not murder."***
- **Protecting Marriage.** 7th Commandment: ***"You shall not commit adultery."***
- **Protecting Property.** 8th Commandment: ***"You shall not steal."***
- **Protecting Purity of Heart.** 10th Commandment: ***"You shall not covet."***

Current Controversial Issues in Christian Ethics: Abortion**,** euthanasia, capital punishment, alcohol and drugs, infertility reproductive technology, stewardship of the environment, civil disobedience, wealth and poverty, discrimination, pornography, homosexuality, transgenderism, and questioning the New Testament ethic. All these are significant issues which generate controversy. Whole books are devoted to each topic.

Codes of Ethics: Codes of ethics may or may not be ethical by Christian standards. Nazi's had an ethic, but much of it was immoral by Christian standards.

On the other hand, actions deemed moral by Christians may not meet secular codes of ethics. Organizations promoting life and those which promote abortion will not agree on ethics. Companies establish codes of ethical conduct to suit their mission. Many organizations and groups have an ethic opposing Christian moral standards. Calling behavior ethical means nothing before knowing the ethical standard used.

Aristotle on Virtues: At this point, we have established definitions for ethics, morals, virtues, and vices. We have looked previously at God's common grace which enables relatively good behavior and events in this fallen world even for people who have not received God's saving grace. Because of common grace, non-Christians can have good morals and virtuous behavior. There is one pagan standard of conduct that has stood the test of time and of which Christians generally approve. That is Aristotle's code of virtues.

Aristotle approached ethics from the perspective of avoiding extremes. Prudence, also known as practical wisdom, is an overarching virtue for Aristotle. Practical wisdom or prudence is necessary for other virtues to function. In Aristotle's view, virtues were always the golden mean between two opposites. As you consider Aristotle's list of virtues, keep in mind that he was a pagan not a believer, yet his virtue lest seems reasonable to believers.

Aristotle's 12 Virtues: (1.) Courage: The midpoint between cowardice and recklessness. The courageous person is aware of danger but continues to do what should be done. (2.) **Justice:** The virtue of dealing fairly with others. It lies between selfishness and selflessness. This virtue can also be applied in different situations and has a whole chapter in Nicomachean Ethics dedicated to various forms it can take. **(3.) Temperance:** The virtue between overindulgence and insensibility. It means neither too much nor too little in eating or drinking or any other activity. (4.) **Liberality:** This is the virtue of charity, the golden mean between miserliness and giving more than you can afford. (5.) **Magnificence:** The virtue of living extravagantly. It rests between stinginess and vulgarity. Aristotle sees no reason to be ascetic but warns against flashiness. (6.) **Magnanimity:** This virtue, related to pride, is to hold to the midpoint between not giving yourself enough credit and having delusions of grandeur. You are to exhibit proper ambition and pride. (7.) **Patience:** This is the virtue which controls your temper. A patient person must neither get too angry nor fail to get angry when they should. (8.) **Truthfulness:** The virtue of honesty. Aristotle places it between the vices of habitual lying and being tactless

or boastful. (9.) **Wittiness:** At the midpoint between buffoonery and boorishness, this is the virtue of a good sense of humor. (10.) **Friendliness:** Being friendly might not seem like a moral virtue, Aristotle claims friendship to be a vital part of a life well lived. This virtue lies between not being friendly at all and being too friendly towards too many people. (11.) **Modesty:** The midpoint between shyness and shamelessness. (12.) **Shame:** The midpoint between being too shy and being shameless. The person who has the right amount of shame will understand when they have committed a social or moral error but won't be too fearful to avoid risking one.

Christian Virtues: All Christian virtues are "fruit of the Spirit" made possible for believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Believers are to be cooperatively active in producing these virtues. Believers must actively seek to acquire each virtue with focused effort (Hebrews 12:14, ***"Strive for … the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."*** Here is a partial list of Christian virtues.

The list: **Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness (or meekness), and Self-control** (Galatians 5:21-23**). Hope** (1 Corinthians 13:13)**. Endurance (Romans 5:3). Hospitality** (Romans 12:13)**. Courage (confidence)** (Philippians 1:20)**. Purity** (2 Corinthians 6:6)**. Generosity** (2 Corinthians 9:11; 1 Timothy 6:18)**. Humility** (Ephesians 4:2)**. Truthfulness** (Ephesians 4:25)**. Tenderheartedness** (Ephesians 4:32)**. Reasonableness (forbearance)** (Philippians 4:5)**. Contentment** (Philippians 4:11)**. Compassion** (Colossians 3:12)**. Gratitude** (1 Thessalonians 5:18)**. Sober mindedness** (1 Timothy 3:2)**. Godliness** (1 Timothy 6:11). **Mercy** (James 3:17). **Holiness** (1 Peter 1:15-16)**. Sympathy** (1 Peter 3:8).

The Virtue of Truthfulness: Ephesians 4:25, ***"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."***
Truthfulness is knowing, understanding, living, and communicating truth. What we are in the inner life of the mind – that which we are in our thought word – determines how we act. The truth or falsity of thoughts is vital. Proverbs 23:7 (NAS), ***"For as he thinks within himself, so is he"*** or as the KJV says, **"*As a man thinketh, so is he.*"** This a profound assertion. People are not merely products of forces around them. They have minds, an inner world, invisible to others, but not to God. From their internal thoughts, people bring forth actions into the external world with planned intent to accomplish what they desire.

As pointed out, Scripture has a high view of truth. Here are some verses illustrating the importance and relevance to life which Scripture assigns to the concept of truth. (1.) John 1:14, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."* (2.) Ephesians 6:14, *"Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness."* (3.) Revelation 21:8, *"But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and <u>all liars</u>, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."* (4.) 1 Corinthians 13:6, *"It* (Love) *does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth."*

Of all people, Christians should be most prepared to deal with issues of truth. Our Lord said *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). To Pilate, He said *"For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."* Pilate responded, *"What is truth?"*

Pilate apparently believed his question to be a "show-stopper." Can you answer Pilate's question? Can truth about something be variable? Can a solid red ball be green at the same time under the same circumstances?

Is truth objective or subjective, or does it depend on circumstances? How are we to make decisions which are consistent with truth? What does goodness have to do with truth? What does truth and goodness have to do with love? These are questions which must be considered.

To be truthful we must know truth. The ability to distinguish "truth" from "falsehood" is vital to life and faith. Being unable to distinguish between what is true and what is false is dangerous and can be fatal like failing to identify a poison, or mistakenly thinking a gun's safety is on, or failing to correctly judge the speed with which a car is approaching as you cross a street. Knowing truth is essential.

<u>Summary:</u> Christian ethics is a distillation of the whole Bible's teaching about the behavior, attitudes, and personal character traits which God approves, disapproves, or is neutral about. To live to please God, knowledge of Christian ethics is essential. The ultimate basis for Christian ethics is the moral character of God as revealed in the Bible. His character is supremely good, unchanging, and eternal.

God is love, so He commands believers to love. He is holy and commands believers to be holy as He is holy. He is merciful and commands believers to be merciful. He is truthful and commands believers to be truthful and to not bear false witness. Believers are to *"do all to the glory of God"* (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Obedience to God is not to be a burden. Obedience brings blessings. Willful sin interrupts fellowship with God. Continued willful sin brings condemnation.

The virtue of truthfulness is vital. Christians depend on learning truth from Scripture and those who expound Scripture. Every Christian should be truthful in all they do. Every Christian should know how to distinguish truth from error.

Next: Knowing, understanding, and acting in accordance with truth.