

# **Christian Ethics (CL3)**

## **Authority in Christian Ethics**

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# Christian Ethics (CL3)

Oct. 1 – Intro to Ethics; Christian Ethics

Oct. 8 – Ethics, Morality and Religion

Oct. 15 – Authority in Christian Ethics

Oct. 22 – Duty Ethics (Deontology)

Oct. 29 – ***Mid-Term Break***

Nov. 5 – Goal Ethics (Consequentialism)

Nov. 12 – Virtue Ethics


Nov. 19 – Conclusion; Final Exam

# What is Ethics?

- **Ethics, or moral philosophy**, is the branch of philosophy that deals with determining the proper course of action for humanity, involving systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior.
- Ethics investigates the questions ***“What is the best way for people to live?”*** and ***“What actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances?”***
- In practice, ethics tries to resolve questions of human morality by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, crime and justice.

# Religious Ethics

Most religions have an ethical component

- Buddhism
  - Confucianism
  - Taoism
  - Hinduism
  - Islam
  - Christianity
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# Jewish Ethics

- The origin of “Ethical Monotheism”
- Predates Socrates, Plato and Aristotle
- Bases for Jewish ethics:
  - *Torah/Tanakh* (Written & oral Hebrew Bible)
  - *Halakhah* (*Talmud*/Rabbinic religious literature)
- Influence of Greek ethics
  - esp. Maimonides’ interpretation of Aristotle
- “Justice, Peace and Truth”
- *Chesed* (“loving-kindness”)

# The Issue of Authority

1. What should be the sources of authority for Christian ethics? That is, from where should Christians derive needed insight and direction for shaping their ethics?
2. How should we properly invoke and interpret *Scripture* with regard to Christian ethics?

In seeking to answer these questions, we must:

- Consider the Old Testament, as prophetic and biblical tradition of the people of Israel.
- Consider the New Testament witness, especially as it records the teaching and practices of Jesus.

# Morality and Hebrew Scriptures

- The Church came out of the ancient people of Israel, seeing themselves as an extension of the Old Testament story, and Jesus as God at work at a new and higher level in human history.
- However, there really was no “Old Testament ethics” in any abstract, philosophical sense.
- The ancient Hebrews had no philosophical discourses on morality, and no codified, theoretical systems of ethics.
- Instead we have a story... of a people called forth and existing as the Chosen People of God in the world. OT ethics grew out of that story and what it meant to the Hebrew people.

# Morality as an Aspect of Covenant

- The theme of **covenant relationship** is foundational to any ethics or ethical life for the Hebrew people.
- Covenant, for the Hebrew people, meant their conviction that Israel was called into a unique relationship with God. That conviction provided the foundation for their ethical life.
- The covenant between God & Israel's was understood to be **entirely** a product of God's divine grace – exemplified in the Exodus event.
- Because of this unilateral outpouring of divine grace, Israel was left with certain obligations, which might be summed up as being called “to be holy, as God is holy.”



# Ethical Consequences of Covenant Relationship

- Covenant obedience to God required the Israelites to be separate from all that was profane & defiled.
- It further required the Israelites to be upright in their human interactions – family life, commerce, concern for the less fortunate, limits on vengeance, truthfulness, and even proper treatment of animals.
- No division of religious practice from daily life.
- A clean heart was demanded – but also “clean hands.”
- Holiness was not blind obedience to imposed laws, the responsibility that came of being a recipient of divine grace. The covenant law marked Israel as being different from all other nations.

# Ethical Consequences of Covenant Relationship

“The covenant aimed to establish a personal relationship, not a code of conduct in the abstract.” Walter Kaiser

- It was the **relationship** that was important – the *conduct* simply reflected the relationship; a patterning of their lives according to the holiness and righteousness of God with whom they were in relationship. They were to strive to be “like” God in how they lived.
- This covenant theme – that God had chosen to enter into a covenant relationship with Israel – establishes THE theological foundation for understanding ethics in the Old Testament, as it creates an indissoluble link between inward belief and outward conduct.
- This also the “wisdom” theme prominent in the OT – wisdom understood as knowing the proper way to live and as a result living properly.

# Sin as Failure in Relationship

- With God as the standard for holiness, there was among the Israelites a profound sense of their own failing.
- Sin was understood as failure to live up to covenant obligations; not just as an outward transgression of the law, but as rebellion against God – an understanding later reflected in the teachings of Jesus.
- As David confessed, “*Against you and you only have I sinned.*” Psalm 51:4
- Though the expectations inherent in the covenant relationship with God were codified into the Law, OT authors did not see obedience to the law as the goal of human existence – but rather it was to be a faithful covenant partner to God. The law simply helped clarify what that covenant relationship required – especially since the covenant existed long before there was a codification of the law.

# Remembrance and Anticipation

- The foundation of OT ethics lay in God's *past* action of establishing and confirming Israel as his covenant people.
- But the story did not *end* in the past – the Israelites had a keen sense of future, & of God's promise to bring renewal, even to those who failed in covenant.
- This eschatological perspective is repeated often in the Prophets. The very essence of prophetic vision & proclamation was a call to an ethical response *now* from Israel (and even the surrounding nations), in preparation for God's future kingdom work.
- This meant present moral decisions had consequences for the future, and that even if God did not act *now*, they were sure there would be a divine response at the end of the age.

# Remembrance and Anticipation

- The Hebrew people looked for a time when God would act decisively on their behalf. The New Testament evangelists declared this had happened with the coming of Jesus.
- For us, the centerpoint for all Christian ethics must be God's saving act in Jesus. It is only from a Christological perspective that we now can understand what it means to live as God's covenant people.
- Jesus saw the Hebrew Bible as the primary source of authority in life, especially with regards to ethics.

***“It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter of the law to be dropped.”***

*Luke 16:17*

- Over against the authority of Scripture Jesus compared the inadequacy of “human tradition” in his strong criticisms of the religious leaders of his day.

# Law Versus Covenant Grace

- Jews of Jesus' day thought God would reward them for scrupulous, literal observance of the letter of the law. But Jesus was clear – no acts of righteousness can make a person worthy before God.
- To Jesus, God's people are NOT those who appear on the surface to be righteous, but rather those who are penitent, who humble themselves and cry for mercy. (*“God rejects the proud, but accepts the humble of heart.”*)
- The Jews thought the ethical life was to satisfy God through strict obedience to the law, versus to be true to our relationship with our heavenly Father whom we love, trust and obey with gladness of heart.
- For Jesus, the ethical life arises as our response to God's unilateral demonstration of love, grace and favor towards us – which he has already given freely – rather than our attempt to win his favor. In this way Jesus reoriented the direction of ethics.

# The “Good Life” Versus Covenant Grace

- For Jesus the “good life” is not the quest for happiness, but the pursuit of God’s Kingdom; a life under God’s reign, in accordance with his will, and accepting of his great love.
- Jesus summarized God’s will in the double command to love – the “core and climax of the whole of moral doctrine.” (Rudolf Schnackenburg)
- The central Christian ethical principle is heartfelt love for God, followed immediately by love for others. True citizens of the Kingdom are those who love God from their hearts and who love others as themselves, as reflected in humble service to both God and neighbor.
- *“The real ground of moral obligation is the perceptible saving act of God in Jesus’ coming and activity, his revelation of redemption, which is both historical and eschatological, and which guarantees the accomplishment which is to come.”*

R. Schnackenburg