

# LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

*Thinking Wisely about Right and Wrong*



NORMAN L. GEISLER  
AND RYAN P. SNUFFER

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"*Love Your Neighbor* avoids telling us what to believe or how to behave in any given situation, but presents clear guidelines to help us determine where the high ground can be found."

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*Love Your Neighbor: Thinking Wisely about Right and Wrong*

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*Part One*

# INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS





# THE NATURE OF GOD

“GOD” IS A GENERAL TERM that takes on many meanings in many different cultural contexts. Various pantheistic religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and New Age cults, define “god” as an impersonal force that is in some way equated to an eternal universe. The idea of a pantheistic God is in direct conflict with the idea of a theistic God. The monotheistic religions of the world (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) view God as personal and separate from His creation. The ethical approach of this text is based on a monotheistic or theistic concept of God—a God who is absolute in His nature, resulting in absolute moral ideas. It is not the purpose of this text to prove that theism is true or that Christianity is superior to the other theistic religions. One would need to study theology or apologetics to establish these ideas. From this point it will be assumed that theism, and in particular, biblical Christianity, is true.<sup>1</sup>

Various terms related to God will be used throughout this text. It is important to know the attributes of God if one is to understand the ethical approach of the biblical Christian. The theistic God’s attributes can be divided into two categories—those that relate to His infinite nature and those that relate to

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<sup>1</sup>There are many good apologetics resources for those interested in this study. A companion to this text dealing more specifically with apologetics is Ryan P. Snuffer, *Truth in Focus* (Longwood, Fla.: Xulon, 2005). See also Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004).

His moral nature. God's infinite attributes are aspects of His nature or essence. His moral attributes relate to His morality. These attributes collectively define who the theistic God is. There is likely much more to His nature than what has been revealed to us. This is just an introduction to what we know through reason and the sacred writings of the Bible.

## INFINITE

*Eternality.* Isaiah 57:15 teaches that God dwells in a higher realm known as eternity. "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place.'" The eternal realm is beyond time and space. Time had a beginning. Eternity gave birth to time. Eternity is the infinite abode of God. Humans can only speculate about this aspect of reality. Some see eternity as a higher dimension beyond time. God is not limited in His nature and is therefore not limited to time. He can view all of history simultaneously.

*Transcendence.* This term simply means that God is beyond this universe. This is in contrast to the pantheistic view that God is the universe. God created the universe apart from Himself; He is not subject to its physical laws but in control of them.

*Immanence.* God is not only beyond this universe, He is also present within it.

*Omnipotence.* God is all-powerful. He is sovereign over His creation and has the power to act within it and control what happens.

*Omniscience.* God is all-knowing. There is nothing that happens that surprises God. Since He sees all of history simultaneously, He knows all things. He not only knows everything that has happened or will happen, but He is aware of every possible event. He knows every possible outcome of every possible choice or event.

*Omnipresence.* God is everywhere present in the universe.

*Immutability.* God cannot change. He cannot change anything about His nature. For example, He cannot cease to be eternal; He cannot cease to exist.

## MORAL

*Love.* The Bible often repeats the idea that God is love or that God loves. He loves His creation. In particular, He loves human beings.

*Holiness.* God is morally perfect. He is wholly incapable of sinning in thought or action. Evil is a privation of something good. God is morally complete and therefore perfectly holy.

*Truth.* God cannot lie. He always acts truthfully, speaks honestly, and thinks and acts consistently with Himself.

*Mercy.* God does not always give us what we deserve. The writers of the Bible often prayed for mercy in spite of their sin. Mercy is related to forgiveness.

*Grace.* God gives to people positive blessings that they do not necessarily deserve.

*Justice.* God will always do what is right. He will reward goodness and judge sin.

Of the above moral attributes, love, truth, justice, and holiness can be thought of as something God is. Mercy and grace are actions that God does in accordance with who He is. It could be said that the last four attributes are in some way logically based on love and holiness. For example, God extends mercy and grace because of His love and compassion. These attributes coexist harmoniously without conflict.

## LIMITATIONS OF GOD

Even though God is infinite, He cannot do everything. He can do only what is possible, and some things are not possible.

Some people are offended with the idea that God cannot do everything. Perhaps they have sung a few too many verses of



the children's song "God can do anything, anything, anything . . . but sin." Consider the fact that God cannot make a square circle. Before you say, "He could if He wanted to," bear in mind that this is a logical impossibility.

The fact that God is infinite in His nature does not imply that He can do anything. Here is a partial list of things that God cannot do:

1. God cannot sin (such as break an unconditional promise). To say that God could sin would limit or conflict with His holiness. God is complete in His holiness. The ability to sin would mean that His holiness is not complete. Therefore God cannot sin, or even be tempted with sin (James 1:13).
2. God cannot change His essence or act against His nature (such as cease to exist). God's nature is perfect. Therefore He has no need to change. Even the possibility of change would indicate a less than infinite nature. Malachi 3:6 states that God does not change.
3. God cannot do that which is logically impossible. To say that God could make a square circle or a rock so big that He could not pick it up is logically impossible. God cannot do that which is logically impossible. (Sometimes human "logic" is not correct; therefore, God could do that which would *seem* to oppose logic, but in actuality, God is being logical. It is the human who is mistaken.)

These limitations should not make us think less of God. They should bring comfort and security in knowing that He can be trusted. Though humans cannot grasp the mind of God, He can be understood rationally to the extent that He has revealed Himself to humanity.

## CONCLUSION

The theistic God is eternal, powerful, infinite, holy, and loving. He exists independently from His creation. His essence

or nature cannot be changed; it is absolute. If there is a moral code of ethics that stems from God's nature, it would also be absolute. God is limited only by those things that are logically impossible or those things that would be in conflict with His nature, such as sinning or ceasing to exist.

### DISCUSSION/APPLICATION:

1. Do the attributes of God listed in this chapter bring feelings of inspiration or of fear?
2. Is it a new concept for you to consider God as having limitations?
3. Circle the following attributes or characteristics that are related to God's infinite nature, not His activity:

Eternality

Justice

Love

Holiness

Mercy

Immanence

Omniscience

Transcendence

Truth

Immutability

Omnipotence

Grace



# THE NATURE OF MORALITY

THERE ARE MANY TOUGH questions related to morality that people are asking today.

- Is there such a thing as right or wrong?
- Can it be said that certain things are always right or always wrong?
- Isn't it harder to be morally pure in this day and age than it was a hundred years ago?
- Is it not true that much of what humans accept as right or wrong is related to a person's particular culture?

The answers to these questions are related to the nature of God and truth. God's nature is absolute in the sense that it does not change. Those aspects of God which are moral in nature (love, truth, holiness, mercy, grace, and justice) are therefore absolute. For example, love is absolutely right. Holiness is absolutely right. It is morally proper to show grace and mercy. Justice is equal to righteousness—that which is right.

We know these things about God based on two types of revelation. First, the Bible declares these things to be true. Second, nature itself teaches these things to be true. The human conscience bears witness to the truth that some things are right and some things are wrong. Philosophers refer to this innate sense of right and wrong as the moral law. This is one of the main

reasons C. S. Lewis converted from atheism to Christianity. Notice what he writes: “Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it.”<sup>1</sup> This curious idea is related to a standard outside of themselves. The only way something can be measured is by a standard. A girl can know how tall she is only by comparing herself to a standard, such as a tape measure or another person whose height has been measured.

How is it that people instinctively know that something is either right or wrong? In order for humans to know the difference between right and wrong, there must be an objective standard beyond or independent of the human race. There cannot be a law without a lawgiver. Evidence suggests that there is a universal moral law; therefore, there must be a moral lawgiver, namely, God.

The evidence for this law is so strong that some scientists have suggested that there might be a type of gene that guides human instinct about behavior.<sup>2</sup> This instinct is different than the type of instinct that guides a bird south for the winter and back to its home the following summer. An animal’s instinct consistently guides its behavior. However, this human idea of the moral law is different in that, although humans know what is right and wrong, they don’t always live consistently with what they know they should do.

Murder is absolutely wrong for several reasons related to the nature of God. For instance, it is unloving, unmerciful, and unjust to take away the life of an innocent person. Because it is absolutely right to love and be just, it is absolutely wrong to murder. It is also unloving to steal or to commit adultery with someone else’s spouse. Of course, since God is sovereign over each life that He created, He has the right to take it (Job 1:21). But since we did not create it, we have no right to take it.

God did not arbitrarily make up a list of rules for all morally

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 8. First published in 1952.

<sup>2</sup>Dean Hamer, “Are We Born with a God Gene?” *Charlotte Observer*, October 4, 2004, 17A.

aware beings to keep. What can be considered absolutely right or wrong is that which flows from His absolute nature. If there is a rule that does not necessarily flow from God's nature, then it cannot be thought of as absolute. The differences between an absolute moral idea and a rule that can change will be illustrated in more detail in chapter 3 on "The Old Testament Law."

The system of ethics that will be discussed in this text is based on a view of truth and God that is absolute. The various issues that will be discussed will be viewed in light of Scripture and culture. Some of these issues will be easy to deal with because the issues are closely connected to one of God's moral attributes and are dealt with in the Bible. Other issues will not be as clear, but will require an examination of biblical principles and common sense. Any position that conflicts with God's nature can be easily dismissed as incorrect or wrong.

## SUMMARY

Some moral positions can be considered absolutely right or wrong. What these positions are can be known by whether they are clearly consistent with or clearly in conflict with God's nature. Some things may be based on cultural preferences or needs. The question, Isn't it harder to be morally pure in this day and age than it was a hundred years ago? is the wrong question. No one in any culture has ever lived a completely holy life. A better question is, What is God's will for my life morally? A study of ethics in light of biblical principles will shed light on this question. For the Christian, recognizing what is right and wrong and then acknowledging an inability to be perfect is the first step to finding God's will.

## DISCUSSION/APPLICATION:

1. Why do so many people today cringe at the idea of absolute moral truth? How do the media contribute to people's tendency to reject absolute moral truth?
2. Some would object to the idea of a moral law by pointing

out that many people have different opinions about particular issues such as homosexuality or gambling. Consider, however, the issues of murder, rape, and theft. Though the specific definition of murder may vary slightly from one culture to another, every culture considers murder to be wrong. This is likewise true with rape and theft. People instinctively know that honesty is better than deceit. By what standard can a person say that some particular action is truly better than some other particular action, if there is no moral law?

3. What do you consider some of the most important moral truths in relation to your personal life? What about in your family? What about in society?
4. Speculate about what a society that did not have churches or other institutions attempting to instruct society about morality might be like.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

MOST PEOPLE WHO grew up in the 1950s or earlier can recall seeing the Ten Commandments proudly displayed in courtrooms, school principals' offices, and other public venues. The 1960s brought both positive and negative social changes in our society. The push for racial equality was an important step in the right direction during that time. However, many evangelicals today blame the generation of the 1960s for taking God out of society by, in part, removing the Ten Commandments from all public, government supported institutions. The fires of controversy were reignited when Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore refused to remove from the courthouse a 5,280-pound granite rock on which the Ten Commandments were proudly displayed. Though the majority of Americans are comfortable with public displays of religion as long as they are not forced on people, many influential Americans believe that the separation of church and state means there should be no public displays of religion in courtrooms, public schools, or other public buildings.

The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20 of the Old Testament. They deal with human relations to God and human relations to other humans. The other world religions support the majority of these commands. C. S. Lewis makes a strong case that the majority of these commands have been



universally assumed in the major cultures throughout history.<sup>1</sup> He is correct in asserting that most people throughout history have embraced a code of ethics very similar to the Ten Commandments; however, not all individuals are in agreement with these laws.

Some detractors point out that in order to establish an Old Testament system of Law, one would have to establish a sort of theocracy (rule by God). Detractors also point out that there were about twenty different sins that people were put to death for in the Old Testament. These sins included murder, witchcraft, homosexuality, blasphemy, and rebelliousness. There were other laws about not eating pork, sacrificing animals, not touching dead bodies, and not working on Saturday that would be difficult to sell in today's world. Why should Christians be able to pick and choose which aspects of the Law to enforce and which ones to ignore?

The answer is that they should not. The Old Testament Law was established for a particular time and people in history. Christian doctrine teaches that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Mosaic Law. Early Christian leaders established a new idea sometimes referred to as Christian liberty.<sup>2</sup> Christians should not arbitrarily choose the parts of the Bible that best suit their own ethical ideas. Christians do not need to do this because Jesus showed us a better way, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

One of the reasons for the disharmony in opinions about the Law among believers is ignorance. The "Old Testament Law" is actually a complex set of rules and rituals for the Jewish people before the coming of their Messiah, Jesus. Many of these rules and rituals were based on the need for personal cleanliness. Others were symbolic of God Himself. For example, the purposes of the temple and its associated rituals were fulfilled by the death of Christ on the cross. They were meant as a visual,

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 8. First published in 1952.

<sup>2</sup>Appendix A addresses the idea of Christian liberty.

practical tutor to help the people understand their need for forgiveness and mercy from God. Since Christ fulfilled the Law, what use is there for us today for these ancient writings?

There were different aspects to the Old Testament Law. Though most of the 613 commands from the Old Testament were temporal, the basis for many of these commands is God's absolute nature. For example, a man who commits murder should be put to death. Though God is not necessarily telling us to put all murderers to death today, He is still telling us that murder is wrong. It is absolutely wrong to take away the life of an "innocent" human being made in the image of God. It is absolutely wrong for a man to rape a woman or molest a child. Table 3.1 will help summarize the various aspects of the Law.

**Table 3.1**  
**Aspects of the Mosaic Law**

|                      | <b>Civil</b>  | <b>Ceremonial</b>                 | <b>Moral</b>   |
|----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Types of laws</b> | Stoning homosexuals; thieves repaying seven times the amount they stole                       | Temple sacrifices; cleansing laws | Do not bear false witness; do not covet; do not murder; do not commit adultery |
| <b>Applicability</b> | Practical application of moral law; the application is not absolute but changes from OT to NT | Fulfilled by Christ               | Absolute; based on God's unchanging nature                                     |

As the table depicts, only one of these categories of Old Testament Law is absolute. Furthermore, the ideas under "Moral" law are not unique to the Old Testament. These ideas are found abundantly in the writings of the other religions of the world, and in the New Testament. They seem to be common sense to most people. People often feel guilty when they break these commands, even if they have never read the Bible.

The Ten Commandments come close to encapsulating

this idea of God's moral law. All except the fourth command, to remember the Sabbath, are repeated by Christ in the New Testament. The Jewish Sabbath was designated for a particular time in history, but the principle of the Sabbath remains. There are times in our lives in which work and play should be set aside for a time of worship. Whether a government like the United States should endorse these ideas or should mandate its citizens to follow these ideas is a subject we'll save for another chapter.

One should be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that there were three kinds of laws in the Old Testament and that one is binding and the other two are not. There was only one Old Testament Law. Nowhere in either Testament is there a clear distinction made among the three aspects of the Law. These are simply observations made by people who study the Bible. The entire system of law was abolished when Christ fulfilled the Law by His life, death, and resurrection. But part of the system is based on God's unchanging moral nature and therefore transcends any system, whether ethical, religious, or political. This same basic moral law, which reflects the unchanging nature of God, is written on the hearts of all persons (Rom. 2:12–15) and was called by the American Declaration of Independence "Nature's Laws" which came from "Nature's God."

## DISCUSSION/APPLICATION:

1. Find an example in one of the books of Moses of each aspect of the Law:
  - a. Civil:
  - b. Ceremonial:
  - c. Moral:
2. Paul wrote in Romans 2:14–15 that God has written His law on people's hearts and that their conscience bears witness to it. List and describe three examples that demonstrate

that people universally have the moral law written on their hearts. In other words, list three things that are taboo in almost every culture of the world.

- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
3. List five ways in which removing the Ten Commandments from the public arena in America may have affected morality in America.
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.

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