

Wayne Grudem



CHRISTIAN ETHICS

*An Introduction
to Biblical
Moral Reasoning*



“Wayne Grudem and I have always been on the same page, both in theology and in theological method. *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* has all the excellent features of his *Systematic Theology*: biblical fidelity, comprehensiveness, clarity, practical application, and interaction with other writers. His exhortations drive the reader to worship the triune God. I hope the book gets the wide distribution and enthusiastic response that it deserves.”

John Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

“This work by Wayne Grudem is the best text yet composed in biblical Christian ethics, and I mean that several ways. It is more comprehensive, more insightful, and more applicable than any comparable work and is sure to be a classroom classic. But what I like most is how Grudem unites a scholar’s mind with a disciple’s heart more committed to pleasing Christ than contemporaries, and more zealous for strengthening the church than impressing the world.”

Daniel R. Heimbach, Fellow, L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture;
Senior Professor of Christian Ethics, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Wayne Grudem has a rare gift in making complex theological and ethical concepts accessible. He also has encyclopedic knowledge and an organized, analytical mind. All this is fully evident in this important book, which provides an invaluable resource to both scholars and practitioners.”

Peter S. Heslam, Senior Fellow, University of Cambridge; Director, Transforming Business

“Wayne Grudem is a master at cutting into meaty intellectual topics, seasoning them, and serving them up in flavorful, bite-sized morsels for the ordinary person to savor and digest. Don’t let the size of this book deter you! This rich feast will help you figure out what the Bible says about how to live today. Dig in. Taste the wisdom that is sweeter than honey. Eat from the bread that will bring health to your spirit and life to your bones.”

Mary Kassian, author, *Girls Gone Wise*

“So much in the field of ethics today merely describes the issues and the alternatives. The very idea that there is a ‘right’ answer to anything is anathema. In such a stagnant climate, Wayne Grudem’s *Christian Ethics* is a breath of fresh air. It demonstrates how the Bible provides specific answers to particular questions. However, this is not merely a compendium of his personal views on issues. Where his views are at odds with other views, even within evangelical Christianity, he explains those alternatives to his readers and invites comparison. Readers are challenged to think and are given the material they need to do so in a God-honoring way. We are in Grudem’s debt for this massive labor of love.”

John Kilner, Professor of Bioethics and Contemporary Culture, Forman Endowed
Chair of Ethics and Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Director of Bioethics
Programs, Trinity International University

“Wayne Grudem has done it again. His *Systematic Theology* has equipped countless Christians, churches, and pastors in the truth of God’s Word in a clear, accessible, and faithful manner. Now his *Christian Ethics* promises to do the same in helping us apply God’s Word to our lives. In a time when obedience is often minimized in the name of grace, this book equips us to delight in God’s will for our lives in response to grace.”

C.J. Mahaney, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

“Through this encyclopedic treatment of applied ethics, Wayne Grudem shows how his method of whole-Bible hermeneutics can help Christians sort through the thorny ethical issues of the day. From the beginning of life to the end of life, and everywhere in between, Grudem demonstrates what faithfulness looks like in a God-centered, Scripture-centered life. Read with an open Bible and an open heart.”

C. Ben Mitchell, Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee

“Insightful, encyclopedic, biblical, and distinctively evangelical, this new book from Wayne Grudem is a massive contribution to Christian ethics. It will stand as one of the most important and definitive works of this generation. Readers should engage it chapter by chapter, and then keep it close at hand for continuing consultation.”

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is the best all-around book on Christian ethics I’m aware of, and I plan to require it as the primary textbook for my course on biblical ethics. Grudem writes in his characteristic style: clear, logical, accessible, and (usually!) persuasive.”

Andy Naselli, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Theology, Bethlehem College & Seminary; Elder, Bethlehem Baptist Church

“This nearly exhaustive treatment of Christian ethics is destined to become the standard evangelical text for many years to come. It is wide-ranging, thoughtful, and unafraid to engage with controversial issues and with those who take a different approach. Regardless of whether one can side with Grudem on each topic, all of us can benefit immensely from his lucid presentation. There is hardly an ethical issue he doesn’t address, and I will be consulting his work regularly for wisdom and guidance on a variety of matters that the church faces in a morally decadent and confused world. Highly recommended!”

Sam Storms, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

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AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL MORAL REASONING

WAYNE GRUDEM

Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning

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For Hannah, Ava, and Will,
in the hope that when you grow up the world will be a better place—
a world in which the will of God
is more fully understood and obeyed “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10)

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	17
ILLUSTRATIONS	21
PREFACE	23

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1	Introduction to Christian Ethics	37
	<i>What is Christian ethics? Why should Christians study ethics?</i>	
	<i>How should we study it? Why should we base our study of ethics</i>	
	<i>on everything the Bible says rather than on a few major ethical</i>	
	<i>principles from Scripture?</i>	
Chapter 2	The Ultimate Basis for Ethics: The Moral Character of God	69
	<i>Where did the Bible's ethical standards come from? Why should we</i>	
	<i>think they are valid? Do these ethical standards apply to all people</i>	
	<i>in all societies at all times?</i>	
Chapter 3	Our Source of Ethical Standards: The Bible	79
	<i>Is the Bible supposed to teach us how to live? How do we know it is</i>	
	<i>true and trustworthy? Can everybody understand it?</i>	
Chapter 4	The Goal of Ethics: Living for the Glory of God	106
	<i>Why should Christian ethics include more than learning about</i>	
	<i>right actions? Why is it important to develop Christlike character?</i>	
	<i>Why should we consider the results of our actions? How is the study</i>	
	<i>of ethics related to our personal relationship with God?</i>	
Chapter 5	The Joys and Blessings of Obedience to God and the Harmful	
	Consequences of Sin	125
	<i>Even though our sins are forgiven, what additional blessings come</i>	
	<i>to our lives when we obey God and avoid sin? Will there be negative</i>	
	<i>consequences if we continue in willful sin?</i>	

Chapter 6	How to Know God’s Will: Factors to Consider in Making Ethical Decisions	148
	<i>What factors should we consider in making ethical decisions? What does it mean to be “led by the Holy Spirit”?</i>	
Chapter 7	Christians Will Never Have to Choose the “Lesser Sin”	187
	<i>Is it right to tell a lie in order to protect a human life? Does God really want us to obey every command of Scripture? Will we ever face an impossible moral conflict?</i>	
Chapter 8	How Should Christians Use the Old Testament for Ethical Guidance? ..	209
	<i>If the entire Mosaic covenant has been canceled, can we still gain wisdom from studying it? How can we know which Old Testament laws contain wise guidance for us today, and which laws were only intended for Israel before the time of Christ?</i>	

PART 2: PROTECTING GOD’S HONOR

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image.”

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.”

“Remember the Sabbath day.”

“You shall not bear false witness.”

Chapter 9	No Other Gods	267
	<i>Why is a right relationship with God the first requirement for studying ethics? What things are we tempted to value more than God today?</i>	
Chapter 10	No Carved Images	278
	<i>Is all artwork prohibited, or only that which is used for worship? Is it wrong to make images of God for artistic purposes? What about pictures of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit?</i>	
Chapter 11	Purity of Speech	288
	<i>What does it mean to take God’s name “in vain”? What guidelines does Scripture give us regarding obscene language, oaths, vows, and humorous speech?</i>	
Chapter 12	Lying and Telling the Truth	309
	<i>Is it ever right to lie? Is there a difference between a spoken lie and</i>	

actions that deceive people? Does the Bible teach anything about plagiarism or punctuality?

Chapter 13	The Sabbath Commandment.....	342
	<i>Why did the day of worship change from Saturday to Sunday? Is it wrong to work on Sundays?</i>	

PART 3: PROTECTING HUMAN AUTHORITY

“Honor your father and your mother.”

Chapter 14	Authority of Parents.....	365
	<i>Why does God want children to honor their parents? Should adult children continue to be obedient to their parents? Is spanking wrong? What are the advantages of public schools, Christian schools, and homeschooling?</i>	
Chapter 15	Equality and Leadership in Marriage	389
	<i>How can husbands have a leadership role in marriage if men and women are equal in value before God? How should a husband’s headship and a wife’s support of that headship work out in practice? What are the arguments used by evangelical feminists today?</i>	
Chapter 16	Civil Government.....	426
	<i>Why did God establish civil government? What should governments do? Is it ever right to disobey the government or to try to change the government? What is the right relationship between church and state? Does the Bible support monarchies, or does it favor some sort of democracy?</i>	
Chapter 17	Other Authorities	488
	<i>How should Christians relate to people who have authority in the workplace, in the church, and in school?</i>	

PART 4: PROTECTING HUMAN LIFE

“You shall not murder.”

Chapter 18	Capital Punishment.....	505
	<i>Is it ever right for the government to put a criminal to death?</i>	

Chapter 19 War.....	526
<i>How can we know if a war is a “just war”? Is it right for a Christian to serve as a soldier? What are the arguments in favor of a pacifist position? Is it right for nations to have nuclear weapons?</i>	
Chapter 20 Self-Defense	551
<i>Is it ever right for Christians to use physical force to defend themselves against physical attack? Is it right to use a weapon if available? Is it right for a Christian to own a gun?</i>	
Chapter 21 Abortion	566
<i>What does the Bible teach about the protection of an unborn child? Is there scientific evidence that the unborn child is a distinct person? What about abortion in the case of rape or to save the life of the mother?</i>	
Chapter 22 Euthanasia	587
<i>Is it wrong to put to death a person in great pain who has no hope of recovery? How can we know when to stop medical treatment near the end of someone’s life? Should the law allow doctors to perform euthanasia when a patient requests it?</i>	
Chapter 23 Suicide.....	606
<i>Can a person who commits suicide be forgiven?</i>	
Chapter 24 Aging and Death	616
<i>What are the blessings that come with aging? Is it right for Christians to spend money on hair dye or cosmetic surgery? Why is it important to have a will and other end-of-life documents? What about cremation?</i>	
Chapter 25 Racial Discrimination	637
<i>Why is it wrong to discriminate against others on the basis of racial differences? Does the Bible say anything about interracial marriage? What was wrong with the arguments of people who tried to defend racial discrimination from the Bible?</i>	
Chapter 26 Health	654
<i>Why does God want us to care for our physical bodies? What should we think about sleep, vaccinations, organic foods, tattoos, and circumcision?</i>	
Chapter 27 Alcohol and Drugs.....	675
<i>What are the dangers of alcoholic beverages? Is it wrong to use alcohol in moderation? What are the dangers related to the legalization of marijuana?</i>	

PART 5: PROTECTING MARRIAGE

“You shall not commit adultery.”

Chapter 28 Marriage	699
<i>What are the essential elements for a marriage to occur? Why does Scripture place a high value on sexual intimacy within marriage, but prohibit it outside of marriage? Should the Bible’s definition of marriage apply to all cultures and all societies? What safeguards can help protect a marriage against adultery? Is it wrong for a couple to live together prior to marriage? What does the Bible say about singleness?</i>	
Chapter 29 Birth Control.....	746
<i>Should we think that birth control is morally acceptable? If so, are there types of birth control that are morally wrong? What birth-control methods are morally acceptable?</i>	
Chapter 30 Infertility, Reproductive Technology, and Adoption	762
<i>How do biblical principles help us evaluate modern reproductive technologies, particularly artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, embryo adoption, and surrogate motherhood? Why does the Bible view adoption so positively?</i>	
Chapter 31 Pornography	784
<i>Why is viewing pornography wrong? What are the harmful results?</i>	
Chapter 32 Divorce and Remarriage	799
<i>According to the Bible, what are the legitimate grounds for divorce, if any? Is divorce morally acceptable in a case of physical abuse? Neglect? If a divorce is granted for biblically legitimate reasons, is remarriage always allowed? Can a divorced person become a church officer? What reasons are given for the “no remarriage” view?</i>	
Chapter 33 Homosexuality and Transgenderism.....	843
<i>Do the biblical passages about homosexuality still apply today? How should we analyze recent arguments claiming that the Bible can be interpreted to allow for faithful homosexual relationships? Is homosexual desire wrong? Can people be “born gay”? How should we evaluate the claims of certain people that they are “transgender”? Can sex-change surgery change a man into a woman, or a woman into a man?</i>	

PART 6: PROTECTING PROPERTY

“You shall not steal.”

Chapter 34	Property: The Goodness and Necessity of Private Ownership of Property	895
	<i>Why does God enable human beings to own property? Is this a good thing? Does God approve of increased human flourishing on the earth? What are the dangers of the “health-and-wealth gospel”?</i>	
Chapter 35	Work, Rest, Vacations, and Retirement	921
	<i>Why did God give us productive work to do? Is work today a blessing or curse? Does God approve of longer vacations? What about retirement?</i>	
Chapter 36	Increasing Prosperity: Is More Prosperity a Good Thing?	940
	<i>Is poverty more pleasing to God than prosperity? Did God intend human beings to continue inventing and developing new and better products? How can we guard against materialism? Why has the influence of the Bible led to increased material prosperity in many nations?</i>	
Chapter 37	Poverty and Wealth	958
	<i>Is all monetary inequality morally wrong? How can we best help the poor? How can poor nations overcome poverty? Are Western affluence and lack of generosity the main reasons why poverty continues today?</i>	
Chapter 38	Personal Financial Stewardship	1013
	<i>How much of our income should we give to the Lord’s work? What blessings come to us as a result of generous giving? Is it right to leave an inheritance to our children? How much should we save for the future? How much should we spend on ourselves? Is gambling morally wrong?</i>	
Chapter 39	Borrowing, Lending, and the Question of Debt	1045
	<i>Why is the ability of human beings to borrow and lend a good gift from God? Does the Bible teach us that it is always wrong to charge interest on a loan? When is it right to go into debt, and what are the dangers of it?</i>	
Chapter 40	Business Ethics	1058
	<i>Why are buying and selling morally good activities? Why should</i>	

we view profit, competition, and the existence of corporations as morally good things? Do multinational corporations exploit poor nations?

Chapter 41 Stewardship of the Environment..... 1095

Why is the preservation of “untouched nature” not a biblical ideal?

Why should God’s creation of a “very good” earth lead us to expect that we will not deplete the earth’s resources in the foreseeable future? Is there a real danger that human use of fossil fuels will create destructive global warming?

PART 7:

PROTECTING PURITY OF HEART

“You shall not covet.”

Chapter 42 Purity of Heart..... 1173

Why is God concerned with purity in our hearts? How can we attain contentment with what God has given us?

APPENDIX A: SHOULD WE MOVE BEYOND THE NEW TESTAMENT
TO A BETTER ETHIC? 1185

*An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis**

APPENDIX B: SCRIPTURE VERSIONS CITED..... 1233

GLOSSARY..... 1235

NAME INDEX..... 1247

HYMN INDEX..... 1254

SCRIPTURE INDEX..... 1255

SUBJECT INDEX..... 1276

ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1968
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CEV	Contemporary English Version
cf.	compare
chap.	chapter
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ESV	English Standard Version
et al.	and others
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Study Edition. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
KJV	King James Version

LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1996
LXX	Septuagint
mg.	margin or marginal notes
n.	note
n.s.	new series
NAC	New American Commentaries
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NET	The NET Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentaries
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NPNF ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. 1886–1889. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
para.	paragraph
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
RSV	Revised Standard Version
sect.	section
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
trans.	translated by
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
vol.	volume

WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

4.1	Christian Character Traits	111
6.1	God's Guidance in Everyday Decisions.....	182
6.2	Two Views on God's Guidance.....	183
11.1	"Registers" in Speech.....	296
15.1	The Biblical Ideal and Errors Spouses Can Make	410
34.1	The "Overcorrection" of the Prosperity Gospel Movement.....	913
36.1	Gross World Product, 2000 BC to AD 2000	941
36.2	A Nation's Religious Background and Its Prosperity	951
41.1	Population Densities, India and China.....	1111
41.2	Population Densities, Other Nations	1112
41.3	Population Densities, Select States	1112
41.4	Distribution of the Earth's Water.....	1115
41.5	World Water Usage.....	1116

Figures

15.1	Authority in the Trinity and in Marriage	414
18.1	The Deterrence Effect.....	519
37.1	Charitable Giving by Country (as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product) 1005	
37.2	Charitable Giving by Country (Private Donations)	1006
41.1	World Cereal Yields	1114
41.2	Average Concentrations of SO ² and Smoke in London, 1585–1994/5	1119

41.3 Connection between GDP per Capita and Particle Pollution in 48 Cities in 31 Countries, 1972 and 1986.	1120
41.4 Life Expectancy in England and Wales, 1200–1998.....	1126
41.5 World Electricity Production from All Energy Sources, 2014	1127
41.6 World Crude Oil Proved Reserves.....	1128

PREFACE

I have written this book for Christians who want to understand what the Bible teaches about how to obey God faithfully in their daily lives. I hope the book will be useful not only for college and seminary students who take classes in Christian ethics, but also for all other Christians who seek, before God, to be “filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” with the result that they will live “in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:9–10).

This book as a whole is an invitation to experience the great blessing of God that comes from walking daily in paths of obedience, knowing more of the joy of God’s presence, and experiencing his favor on our lives (see chap. 4). It is an invitation to delight in the goodness and beauty of God’s moral standards because we understand that delight in those standards is really delight in the infinitely good moral character of God himself (see chap. 2). To delight in God’s moral standards should lead us to exclaim with the psalmist, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

But this book also contains a challenge. I am concerned that teaching about ethics has been neglected in many evangelical churches today—partly because the issues seem complex, partly because pastors do not want to be accused of sounding “legalistic,” and partly because the surrounding non-Christian culture is hostile to Christian moral values, so anyone who teaches biblical ethics is likely to be criticized by unbelievers. Therefore, I hope this book will help to meet a need among Christians today for more biblical ethical understanding. The challenge in the book is for Christians today to live lives of personal holiness, lives that will often be distinctly different from those of others in the secular culture that surrounds us, not being “conformed to this world” but rather being “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” (Rom. 12:2).

I cannot claim to live up to all of the ethical standards described in this book, nor can anyone else who reads it or teaches from it. Jesus said, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), and that includes not only moral perfection in our *actions*, but also unflinching perfection in our *motives* and *heart attitudes*—something that no one is capable of in this life. Who could ever claim to have

perfectly obeyed even the two commandments that Jesus called the greatest: to love God and to love our neighbor?

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 22:37–40)

But we press on. Knowing our weaknesses and failures, we can still say with the apostle Paul, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, *I press on toward the goal* for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14).

If we do this, we can hope that our lives will increasingly give glory to God as we seek to honor him and reflect his character in all that we do. “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov. 4:18).

This book is similar in its method to my earlier book *Systematic Theology*,¹ because both books seek to explain “what the whole Bible teaches” about various specific topics. However, *Systematic Theology* dealt with theological topics such as the Trinity, the person of Christ, the atonement, and salvation, while this book deals with ethical topics such as lying and telling the truth, war, abortion, euthanasia, racial discrimination, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, stewardship of money, wise use of the environment, and many other topics.²

In the subtitle, I have called this book “An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning” because I have tried to make it understandable even for Christians who have never studied Christian ethics before. I have avoided using technical terms without first explaining them. And most of the chapters can be read on their own, so that someone can begin at any chapter and grasp its content without having read the earlier material.

Yet this book, despite its size, is still an *introduction* to Christian ethics. Entire books have been written about the topics covered in most of the chapters in this book, and expansive academic articles have been written about many of the passages that I quote in this book. Therefore, each chapter is capable of opening out into additional study in more breadth or more depth for those who are interested. The bibliographies at the end of each chapter give some help in that direction.

The following six distinctive features of this book grow out of my convictions about what Christian ethics is and how it should be taught:

1. A Clear Biblical Basis for Ethics. Because I believe that ethics should be explicitly based on the teachings of Scripture, in each chapter I have attempted to show where the Bible gives support for the ethical principles under consideration. In fact, because I believe that the words of Scripture themselves have power and authority greater than

¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

²The next several paragraphs are adapted from *ibid.*, 15–20, with permission of the publishers.

any human words, I have not just given Bible references; I have frequently *quoted* Bible passages at length so that readers can easily examine for themselves the scriptural evidence and in that way be like the noble Bereans, who were “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). This conviction about the unique nature of the Bible as God’s words has also led me to include a Scripture memory passage at the end of each chapter.

2. Clarity in the Explanation of Ethical Teachings. I do not believe that God intended the study of biblical ethics to result in confusion and frustration. A student who comes out of a course in ethics filled only with moral uncertainty and a thousand unanswered questions is hardly “able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Therefore, I have tried to state the ethical conclusions of this book clearly and to show where in Scripture I find convincing evidence for those positions. I do not expect that everyone reading this book will agree with me at every point of ethics; I do think that every reader will understand the positions for which I am arguing and where Scripture supports those positions.

I think it is only fair to readers of this book to say at the beginning what my convictions are regarding several ethical issues that are disputed within evangelical Christianity. I hold to a conservative view of biblical inerrancy, very much in agreement with the “Chicago Statement” of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy³ (chap. 3). While I agree that Christians are justified by faith alone and not by works, I also believe that our obedience is still important to God, that it brings us much joy and blessing, and that sin is still harmful in various ways (chap. 5). I think that the Bible is the only absolute source of moral standards for us, but I also believe that, subject to Scripture, it is right to give consideration to subjective perceptions of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives (chap. 6). Because of God’s promises to us, I argue that we will never be put in a situation where we are forced to choose the “lesser sin” (chap. 7). Regarding the use of the Old Testament for ethics, I argue that the entire Mosaic covenant has been abrogated and is no longer binding on us, but we can still gain wisdom from it if we bear in mind that it was God’s plan for the people of Israel for a previous era in history (chap. 8).

I conclude from many passages of Scripture that it is never right to lie, in the sense of affirming in speech or writing something we believe to be false (chap. 12). I hold that men and women are equal in value before God, but that God has entrusted the husband with a unique leadership role in marriage (chap. 15). I argue that capital punishment is morally right in some cases (chap. 18), that some wars are morally acceptable as “just wars” (chap. 19), that it is morally right to use physical force to defend ourselves or others from harm in many situations (chap. 20), that abortion is always morally wrong except to save the life of the mother (chap. 21), and that euthanasia is always wrong if it involves murdering a terminally ill patient, but that “letting die” is sometimes morally

³The “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” can be found in my *Systematic Theology*, 1203–7.

right (chap. 22). I conclude that drunkenness is always wrong, but that Scripture does not prohibit moderate use of alcohol, though I recognize good reasons why some Christians may choose total abstinence; in addition, I am opposed to laws that would legalize recreational marijuana (chap. 27).

I argue that some forms of birth control are morally acceptable (chap. 29) and that there are only two legitimate grounds for divorce, adultery and desertion, in which cases remarriage is morally acceptable (chap. 32). I argue that Scripture always views homosexual conduct as morally wrong, and that recent attempts to say that Scripture does not condemn contemporary, faithful homosexual relationships are unpersuasive (chap. 33).

I believe that God approves private ownership of property (chap. 34) and that he also intends that in the process of subduing the earth human beings will enjoy increased prosperity, but I disagree with the distinctive teachings of the “prosperity gospel” movement (chap. 36). Regarding solutions to poverty, I believe that charitable donations and government welfare programs are important to meet urgent needs, but the only long-term solution to poverty will come not through increased generosity but only by the poor being enabled to have productive jobs by which they can support themselves for life (chap. 37). I advocate wise use of the environment, not destructive misuse, and I also give reasons to think that all of the earth’s natural resources will continue to be abundant for the foreseeable future. I argue that we should continue to use fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) as good gifts from God, and that the use of them will not cause dangerous man-made global warming (chap. 41).

This does not mean that I ignore other viewpoints. Where there are differences on these issues within evangelical Christianity, I have tried to represent the other positions fairly, to explain why I disagree with them, and to give references to the best available defenses of the opposing positions. In several cases I have included an extended analysis of a highly influential book from an alternative position. I have also made it easy for students to find treatments of each topic in other evangelical texts by including, at the end of each chapter, the page numbers where that topic is treated in 13 other ethics textbooks.

3. Application to Life. Much of ethics is about application to life, explaining how God wants us to live in ways that honor him. Therefore, I have included much material on application within many of the chapters. In addition, I have added “Questions for Personal Application” at the end of each chapter, as well as a hymn related to the topic of the chapter, so that the study of ethics can be accompanied by worship in God’s presence.

4. Focus on the Evangelical World. I do not think that a true system of ethics can be constructed from within what we may call the “liberal” theological tradition—that is, by people who deny the absolute truthfulness and internal consistency of the Bible or who do not think that the words of the Bible are God’s very words (see the discussion of the authority of the Bible in chap. 3). For this reason, the other writers with whom I interact in this book are mostly within what is called the larger “conservative evangeli-

cal” tradition. I write as an evangelical and for evangelicals. This does not mean that those in the liberal tradition have nothing valuable to say about ethics; it simply means that disagreements with them almost always boil down to differences over the nature of the Bible and its authority. The degree of ethical agreement that can be reached by people with widely divergent bases of authority is quite limited. In addition, the world of conservative evangelical scholarship today is so rich and diverse that it affords ample opportunity for exploration of different viewpoints and insights into Scripture. (At several points I have also added interaction with Roman Catholic teaching, particularly the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁴ because Roman Catholicism continues to exercise a significant influence worldwide.)

5. Hope for Progress in the Unity of the Church on Ethical Issues. Although I listed above several issues on which various viewpoints exist among evangelicals, I believe that there is still much hope for the evangelical church to attain deeper and more unified ethical understanding on many of these issues. Jesus is still at work perfecting his church “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27), and he has given gifts to equip the church “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God” (Eph. 4:13). Though present ethical disagreements may discourage us, these Scriptures remain true, and we should not abandon hope of greater agreement.

6. A Sense of the Urgent Need for Greater Ethical Understanding in the Whole Church. I am convinced that there is an urgent need in the church today for much greater understanding of Christian ethics. My perception is that there is much confusion and uncertainty about ethics among evangelicals today. Not only pastors and teachers need to understand ethics in greater depth—the whole church does as well. It is not that Christians today lack the ability to understand ethics; it is just that they must have access to teaching on it in an understandable form. Once that happens, I think many Christians will find that understanding (and living) the ethical teachings of Scripture is one of their greatest joys.

Many people have helped me in the writing of this book, beginning with the students who took ethics classes from me, a new professor, at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota (1977–1981); the many students in my ethics classes at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois (1981–2001); and finally the students who took the ethics classes that I taught at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona (2001–2017, and I hope continuing for many years to come). In many cases, the positions that I finally adopted in this book have come as a result of correction, modification, or supplementation from thoughtful interaction with these wonderful students over the last 40 years.

In addition, I wish to thank the members of the Christian Essentials class, the adult

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

Bible class that I taught at Scottsdale Bible Church for 12 years (2002–2014). During that time, I taught through the entire sequence of topics in this book and profited immensely from thoughtful interaction with the members of that class. Those class members and many other friends (including some special “prayer partners”) have been praying for me as I worked on this project for several years. I am grateful to God for answering those prayers and giving me strength and diligence to complete this project.

I wish to thank Professor John Frame, whose class in Christian ethics significantly influenced my thinking when I was a student at Westminster Seminary in 1971–1973. Although it is impossible to acknowledge my indebtedness to him at every point in this book, it is appropriate to express gratitude to him here and to say that he has probably influenced my thinking on ethical topics more than anyone else. Many of his former students, as well as readers of his excellent book *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, will recognize echoes of his teaching in the following pages. In fact, his outstanding work *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*⁵ has been the primary textbook that I have used in my ethics classes for the past several years. (Prior to its publication, I used another truly excellent book, *Ethics for a Brave New World*,⁶ by my former colleagues John Feinberg and Paul Feinberg at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.)

Many people helped me with specialized knowledge in certain chapters, especially David Horner regarding the importance of character and the goal of ethics in chapter 4; Tim Kimmel regarding blessings for obedience in chapter 5; Garry Friesen regarding his view of guidance in chapter 6; John DelHousaye and Peter Gurry regarding recent studies in Greek grammar in chapter 6; John Stemberger regarding theonomy in chapter 8; Al Fadi regarding Islamic art in chapter 10; Jacque Chadwick with medical issues in chapters 22, 29, and 30; Michael Herrod and Steve Oman regarding various legal issues in chapter 24 and elsewhere; Jason DeRouchie regarding sexual ethics in chapter 28; Steve Eriksson, Joe Gordon, and Janice Noland regarding singleness in chapter 28; Wayne Lehsten regarding statistics on divorce in chapter 32; Denny Burk regarding homosexuality and transgenderism in chapter 33; Lars Kierspel regarding rabbinic backgrounds in chapter 33; and Vijay Raj and Cal Beisner regarding environmental statistics in chapter 41. In addition, the wisdom and economic knowledge of my previous coauthor Barry Asmus continued to influence my thinking in the material on economics in chapters 34–41.⁷ Andy Naselli read the entire manuscript and made numerous suggestions that significantly strengthened the book. And I am deeply grateful to Greg Bailey of Crossway, who edited the entire manuscript with meticulous care, improving many sentences, strengthening many arguments, correcting many footnotes and Scripture refer-

⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

⁶ John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁷ See Wayne Grudem and Barry Asmus, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

ences, and improving the organization of the material in many chapters. The book is much better because of his skillful work.

Jenny Miller typed several of the chapters with her usual care and precision, and Dan McCurley and Jeff Phillips also did excellent work in typing many of the remaining chapters. For the past several months, Phil Hoshiwara and Michael Alling, my student assistants at Phoenix Seminary, have worked many long hours in carefully proofreading the various chapters, typing the bibliographies, and helping in several other ways. Previous student assistants Josh McCoy, Jason Miller, and Danny Malakowsky also helped with research tasks and computer maintenance. Scott Bauer compiled the cross-references to 13 other ethics texts and helped with other research in various chapters. Brenda Dinell typed those same cross-references and the hymns, and added the Scripture memory passages, at the end of each chapter. Mitch Miller helped me with additional bibliographical research. Mary Lisa Urban helped me improve my skills in using Naturally Speaking software. During the final months of preparing the manuscript, Eric Wildgen and Ryan Carpenter provided additional valuable help in research and proofreading. I am also grateful to Holly DelHousaye, who helped me to see the wisdom of making this book a higher priority than other planned writing projects; to Darryl Gregg, for setting up the lighting in my study; and to Trent Poling, for once again providing me with timely help for a baffling software problem.

I also wish to thank Stan Gundry, senior vice president and editor-in-chief at Zondervan, for graciously granting me permission to adapt several sections from my Zondervan books *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* and *Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* for use in this book. It is inevitable that some topics traditionally treated in ethics courses (such as capital punishment, war, abortion, and euthanasia) will overlap with a book on a Christian view of politics, but I have tried to keep the focus in this book on biblical and ethical considerations, and I frequently refer readers to the longer treatments of the actual political questions that are found in *Politics—According to the Bible*. There is less overlap between this book and my *Systematic Theology*, but I have adapted some sections from that book in my treatment of topics such as aging and death, and in the introductory material in the preface and chapters 1 and 3. I am also grateful to Inter-Varsity Press of the United Kingdom for similarly granting me permission to use this material from *Systematic Theology*.

In the summer of 2014, I spent several weeks at the Tyndale House library in Cambridge, England, working on this book. Conversations about my work with Peter Williams, David Instone-Brewer, Dirk Jongkind, Peter Heslam, and Jonathan Chaplin were helpful to me during that time. Librarian Simon Sykes cheerfully helped me with various arrangements in the library, and Brad Green graciously made it possible for me to have a quiet desk in the crowded library.

Once again, as with my book *Politics—According to the Bible*, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Craig Osten, who accurately and quickly provided me with excellent

assistance in researching a large number of specific factual details that I needed for many of the chapters. And Phil Hoshiwara accurately compiled the glossary for the entire book.

In 2006, my friend C. J. Mahaney approached me about a plan that would enable me to teach half-time at Phoenix Seminary (spring terms only), giving me eight months a year to write. The leadership at Phoenix Seminary agreed, and C. J. then raised the funding to make this possible for the first three years (2007–2010). Since then, I have been able to continue on a half-time schedule, and this is now the seventh book that I have written or coedited as a result of that plan. I am deeply grateful to C. J. for his 2006 idea, for it changed the entire course of my life for the last 10 years.

I am also deeply grateful to my friends Bret Edson, Brad Edson, Brad Routh, and their colleagues at Marketplace One, who have believed in this book from the beginning and who provided financial support that enabled me to continue to be free from teaching during the fall semesters and that also covered some research-related expenses. And I am grateful to President Darryl DelHousaye and Academic Dean Bing Hunter at Phoenix Seminary, who continue to encourage me in my writing.

After I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in December 2015, my son Alexander Grudem moved back home to help me complete this book. He had earned an MA in Christian studies at Regent College, Vancouver, and that academic background enabled him to provide me with substantial assistance. He read through every chapter, made helpful suggestions again and again, and also provided me with a digest of alternative viewpoints from other ethics books in many chapters. The book is much better as a result of his work. (And as I write this in May 2017, I am thankful to God that my Parkinson's symptoms remain remarkably mild and have shown only slow progression.)

Finally, I am thankful to God for the remarkable help of my amazing and wonderful wife, Margaret, who prays for me many times a day and who will always pray for me specifically when I tell her that I am "stuck" in attempting to write a certain section. She protects me from disruptions, brings meals into my study when I am working, encourages me to persevere when I am discouraged or frustrated, and simply contributes joy to our life together in so many ways. She has seen the importance of this book from the beginning, and has continued to support and encourage me as I worked on it.

An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life. (Prov. 31:10–12)

I am sure that this book, like all merely human books, has mistakes and oversights, and probably some faulty arguments as well. If I knew where they were, I would try to correct them! Therefore, I would be grateful if any interested readers would send me

suggestions for changes and corrections. I do not guarantee that I can acknowledge each letter, but I will give consideration to the material in every one, so far as I am able, and will make corrections where I can.

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever! (Ps. 118:29)

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory. (Ps. 115:1)

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Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.

Psalm 119:165

Part 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

What is Christian ethics?

Why should Christians study ethics?

How should we study it?

*Why should we base our study of ethics on
everything the Bible says rather than on a few
major ethical principles from Scripture?*

A. DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

1. Definition for This Book. For purposes of this book the following definition of Christian ethics will be used:

Christian ethics is any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us about which acts, attitudes, and personal character traits receive God’s approval, and which do not?”¹

This definition indicates that our study of Christian ethics will be God-centered and Bible-centered. This book will attempt, for each ethical topic, to collect and synthesize the teaching of all the relevant Bible passages about that topic and then to apply that teaching wisely to various life situations.

My approach here is similar to the approach I took in my book *Systematic Theology*, in which I defined systematic theology as “Any study that answers the question,

¹ This definition of Christian ethics is adapted from John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 10.

‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.”² But, as I explained there:

The emphasis of systematic theology is on what God wants us to *believe* and to *know*, while the emphasis in Christian ethics is on what God wants us to *do* and what *attitudes* he wants us to have. . . . Thus theology focuses on ideas while ethics focuses on situations in life. Theology tells us how we should think while ethics tells us how we should live.³

This book, then, is about how to live one’s life as a Christian today.

This first chapter has several parallels to chapter 1 in my book *Systematic Theology*. This is because my approach is similar: I am asking what the whole Bible says about various topics in both books.

2. Relationship to Other Disciplines. The emphasis of this book will not be on *historical ethics* (a study of how Christians in different periods of history have understood various ethical topics) or *philosophical ethics* (studying ethical topics largely without appeal to the Bible, using the tools and methods of philosophical reasoning and analyzing what can be known about moral right and wrong from observing the world).

These two subjects, which are worthwhile for Christians to pursue, are sometimes also included in a broader definition of the term *Christian ethics*. In fact, some consideration of historical and philosophical matters will be found at points throughout this book. This is because the study of history informs us of the insights gained and the mistakes made previously by others in understanding ethics, especially in the light of Scripture. And the study of philosophy helps us understand theories of moral right and wrong that are common in our culture and have been common in other cultures throughout history, and often helps us reason carefully about difficult ethical situations. But these two areas of study are not the focus of this volume, which emphasizes interacting directly with the biblical text in order to understand what the Bible itself teaches us about various ethical topics. Even though historical and philosophical studies do contribute to our understanding of ethical questions, my conviction (which I will explain in chap. 3) is that only Scripture has the final authority to define which actions, attitudes, and personal character traits receive God’s approval and which

²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 21.

³Ibid., 26. In that same book, I defined Christian ethics with different wording: “Christian ethics is any study that answers the question, ‘What does God require us to do and what attitudes does he require us to have today?’ with regard to any given situation.” Ibid. My new definition in this book shifts the emphasis from what God *requires* to what he *approves*, because there are countless specific actions in life (such as enjoying a beautiful sunset or spontaneously singing a hymn of praise) that God does not actually require of us at that moment, but which he certainly approves. I also added personal character traits (sometimes called virtues) to the definition after some conversations with David Horner of Talbot School of Theology, in which he called my attention to the frequent New Testament emphasis on the importance of Christian virtues (see chap. 4).

ones do not, and therefore it is appropriate to spend significant time analyzing the teaching of Scripture itself.

My emphasis in this book is also different from a third approach that I will call *theological ethics*. Rather than seeking to understand and apply what the *whole Bible* teaches us about how to live (which is my approach), theological ethics begins with *a few major Christian doctrines* and then reasons from those doctrines to ethical conclusions. For example, Oliver O'Donovan starts with the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ and reasons from it to several significant ethical conclusions.⁴ Another example is Richard B. Hays, who starts with the New Testament doctrines of community, cross, and new creation, and then reasons to ethical conclusions.⁵ I agree that the doctrines they use as starting points are clearly emphasized in the New Testament, but rather than limiting our study to what can be deduced from those doctrines, in this book I will attempt to take into account the teachings of the whole Bible on each ethical topic—and that will include taking into account biblical passages that contain ethical teachings that could not be directly derived from those important doctrines.

While I agree that a study of the ethical implications of various Christian doctrines can and does bring beneficial insights into our ethical responsibilities, my concern is that the results of such studies are necessarily more limited in scope, more tentative, and more subject to bias in favor of the personal ethical conclusions of the practitioner, because they do not work on the basis of the richness of all the biblical data or face the constraints of having to be subject to every relevant passage rather than just those passages clearly related to the chosen themes.

Christian ethics, as I have defined my task here, also differs from *Old Testament ethics*⁶ and *New Testament ethics*.⁷ These two disciplines emphasize careful study of various ethical themes in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, but place less emphasis on attempting to draw together the teachings of the *whole Bible* on various topics as they apply to Christians today. At various points, I will make use of the careful work that has been done by specialists in Old Testament ethics or New Testament ethics, and I will then attempt to use that material to draw conclusions about what the whole Bible says to us today about various topics.

⁴ See Oliver O'Donovan's widely acclaimed book *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Leicester, UK: Apollos, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), for this approach.

⁵ See the widely influential book by Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). Hays's book appeals to far more biblical texts, especially New Testament texts, than O'Donovan's, while O'Donovan's method of argument is more distinctly philosophical. But for both authors the starting point is not the entire Bible viewed as a noncontradictory unity, but certain major theological themes drawn from the Bible.

⁶ See, for example, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

⁷ See, for example, Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010); Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity*, Companions to the New Testament (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999); Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

3. Major Categories for Ethical Study. This book is organized into seven broad areas that cover seven areas of ethical decisions. Although I do not think that the old covenant is morally binding on us today (because we are now under the new covenant; see chap. 8), we still need to use some kind of system to organize the study of ethical topics, and I find that the Ten Commandments provide a helpful structure for such a study. In using this structure, I am following in a long line of Christian writers on ethics who have done so.⁸ The broad categories that I employ follow the structure of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) in the following way:⁹

Part 1: Introduction

Part 2: Protecting God's Honor

Commandment 1: "You shall have no other gods before me."

Commandment 2: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image."

Commandment 3: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."

Commandment 9: "You shall not bear false witness."

Commandment 4: "Remember the Sabbath day."

Part 3: Protecting Human Authority

Commandment 5: "Honor your father and your mother."

Part 4: Protecting Human Life

Commandment 6: "You shall not murder."

Part 5: Protecting Marriage

Commandment 7: "You shall not commit adultery."

Part 6: Protecting Property

Commandment 8: "You shall not steal."

Part 7: Protecting Purity of Heart

Commandment 10: "You shall not covet."

B. ETHICAL SYSTEMS: SECULAR AND CHRISTIAN

Because my goal in this book is *to show what the whole Bible teaches Christians* about how to live a life that is pleasing to God, I will not focus much attention on secular theories of ethics, for secular ethical systems do not claim to be subject to the moral

⁸Others who structure their treatment of Christian ethics after the pattern of the Ten Commandments include John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960; based on 1559 edition), 2.8 (367–423); WLC (1647), Questions 98–148; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871–1873; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 3:259–465; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*; David W. Jones, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, B&H Studies in Christian Ethics (Nashville: B&H, 2013); and Robertson McQuilkin and Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

⁹See chap. 8, p. 255, for a discussion of the structure and numbering of the Ten Commandments.

authority of the Bible. However, it is useful here to give a brief overview of secular ethical systems. I have adapted and condensed the following overview from the clear discussion by Scott B. Rae in his book *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*.¹⁰

1. Deontological Systems. The word *deontological* is based on the Greek verb *dei*, used in the sense “it is necessary, it should be done.”¹¹ Deontological systems are ethical systems based on *rules* for right and wrong, what ought to be done and ought not to be done.

Deontological systems can be secular (if the rules are based only on human reason and intuition) or Christian (if the rules come from God’s Word, the Bible). All Christian ethical systems take God’s commands in the Bible as rules that define right and wrong human conduct, and therefore all Christian ethical systems are deontological.

2. Teleological Systems. The word *teleological* is based on the Greek noun *telos*, meaning “end, goal, outcome.”¹² Teleological systems are ethical systems based on seeking the best *results* for an action.

The most common secular teleological theory is *utilitarianism*, which involves seeking the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Most modern arguments about various political issues are based on utilitarian considerations.

Another secular teleological theory is *ethical egoism*, which involves seeking whatever is best for yourself personally, a position that is clearly contrary to Jesus’s teaching, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). The twentieth-century writer Ayn Rand promoted ethical egoism.

In contrast to secular teleological systems, a Christian ethical system should have a God-centered teleological aspect to it, because the Bible tells us that the result we should seek is the glory of God: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

3. Relativism. Ethical relativism is the belief that there is no absolute right and wrong, and so ethical decisions should be based on what is commonly accepted in each person’s culture (*cultural relativism*) or on each individual’s personal preferences (*individual relativism*). In the area of sexual ethics, the dominant view in today’s popular culture (television, movies, music, literature, higher education) is individual relativism (“What’s right for you is right for you, and what’s right for me is right for me.”)

A particular kind of ethical relativism is called *ethical emotivism*. This is the view that there is no such thing as right and wrong, but when people claim that something

¹⁰ Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 15–18; 63–103. Rae includes a substantial critique of the secular versions of each of these ethical systems. See also John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 28–40; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 41–125; and Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*, *Contours of Christian Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

¹¹ BDAG, 213–214.

¹² BDAG, 998, meaning 3.

is morally right or morally wrong, they are merely saying that they like one thing and do not like the other thing. They're just expressing their emotions with ethical language.

Another view that is similar to ethical relativism is called *antinomianism*. The word *antinomian* is based on the Greek prefix *anti-* (meaning "against") and the noun *nomos* (meaning "law").¹³ An antinomian would say that we are not subject to any moral laws. Some of Paul's opponents were apparently antinomian and were teaching, "Why not do evil that good may come?" (Rom. 3:8).

One particular type of relativism that has gained much influence is called *situation ethics*. This is the view that there are no absolutely right or wrong actions, but a person should always do the most loving thing based on the facts in each new situation. This view was made popular by the 1966 book *Situation Ethics*¹⁴ by Joseph Fletcher, an Episcopal priest (later an atheist) and ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School and the University of Virginia.¹⁵

Because the Bible does teach that there is absolute right and wrong, Christian ethics cannot accept ethical relativism. However, as we will see later, careful Christian decision-making will always take into account the factual details about the specific situation under consideration (see chap. 6).

4. Virtue Ethics. Theories of virtue ethics emphasize not whether specific actions are right or wrong, but the moral character of the individual. In virtue ethics, the primary concern is whether you are a virtuous person. In political elections, questions of a candidate's character are often important, and in those cases some emphasis on virtue ethics plays an important role.

A Christian ethical system should emphasize virtue ethics because the Bible teaches that we should seek to develop a Christlike character: Paul says that God predestined us "to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29), and he also says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Peter, in fact, uses the common Greek word for "virtue" (*aretē*, meaning "virtue, moral excellence") when he tells Christians to "make every effort to supplement your faith with *virtue*" (2 Pet. 1:5). For this reason, I include a long list of Christlike character traits in the discussion of the goal of Christian ethics in chapter 4.

5. Conclusion. A system of Christian ethics based on the Bible does not fit neatly into any one of these categories alone. Rather, if our ethical system is derived from the Bible,

¹³ BDAG, 677, meaning 2.

¹⁴ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

¹⁵ I have categorized Fletcher's view as an example of *ethical relativism* because he denies that there are any absolutely right or wrong actions, and even murder, adultery, stealing, or lying might be the most loving thing to do in certain situations. On the other hand, Fletcher's position could also be viewed as an example of *teleological* ethics, because his view holds that the most loving thing to do in each situation is what brings the greatest good for the greatest number of people—and therefore he favors seeking the best results from our actions.

it will be *deontological* (it will define right and wrong based on the rules God gives in Scripture) and also *teleological* (it will seek a good result, namely, doing all for the glory of God), and it will also include a component of *virtue ethics* (it will seek to develop Christlike character in each person).

A Christian approach to ethics will also exercise caution about adopting conclusions from the secular versions of these ethical systems, because all secular systems assume that ethical principles must be developed by human beings using only human observation, reasoning, and intuition, whereas a Christian approach believes that the Bible's ethical teachings are not merely the result of human thinking but have been revealed by God himself.

However, a Christian ethical system will not adopt *moral relativism*, for the Bible does teach that there is absolute right and wrong as defined by God himself.

C. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS STUDY ETHICS?

Why should Christians study Christian ethics? That is, why should we engage in the process of collecting and summarizing the teachings of many individual Bible passages on particular ethical questions? Why is it not sufficient simply to continue reading the Bible regularly every day of our lives?

1. The Basic Reason. In answering these questions, we must be careful not to propose a reason to study Christian ethics that implies that we can somehow “improve” on the Bible by doing a better job of organizing its ethical teachings or explaining them in a better way than the Bible itself has done. If we do this, we may be implicitly denying the clarity or sufficiency of Scripture (see chap. 2).

The basic reason that we should study ethics is to better know God's will for us. The New Testament tells us in several places that we should live in obedience to God's will. For example, Jesus taught that his followers should keep his commandments:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* (Matt. 28:19–20)

If you love me, you will *keep my commandments.* (John 14:15)

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. (John 15:10; see also Rom. 13:9; 1 Cor. 7:19; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:22, 24; 5:2–3; Rev. 12:17; 14:12)

But in order to keep Jesus's commandments, we have to know what they are and understand how they apply to us today, including their Old Testament background

and their further explanation in the New Testament Epistles.¹⁶ That is the study of Christian ethics.

The New Testament Epistles also give instructions to readers that sound very much like calls to study ethics:

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. (Rom. 12:2)

Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. (Eph. 5:10)

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, *with knowledge and all discernment*, so that you may *approve what is excellent*, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9–11)

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be *filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col. 1:9–10)

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with *virtue, and virtue with knowledge*. (2 Pet. 1:5)

For this is the love of God, that we *keep his commandments*. And his commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3)

2. The Benefits That Come from Studying Christian Ethics. Someone might object at this point that, yes, Jesus and the New Testament writers tell us to learn and keep God's commandments, but why does that have to be done in this way, by collecting and study-

¹⁶What is included in teaching "all" that Jesus commanded? In a narrow sense, to teach all that Jesus commanded is simply to teach the content of the oral teaching of Jesus that is recorded in the four Gospels.

However, in a broader sense, "all that Jesus commanded" includes the interpretation and application of his life and teachings, because the first verse of the book of Acts implies that it contains a narrative of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through the apostles after his resurrection. "All that Jesus commanded" can also include the Epistles, since they were written under the supervision of the Holy Spirit and were also considered to be a "command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37; see also John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Pet. 3:2; Rev. 1:1–3). Thus, in a larger sense, "all that Jesus commanded" includes all of the New Testament.

Furthermore, when we consider that the New Testament writings endorse Jesus's absolute confidence in the authority and reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures as God's words (see chap. 3), and when we realize that the New Testament Epistles also endorse this view of the Old Testament as the absolutely authoritative words of God, then it becomes evident that we cannot teach "all that Jesus commanded" without including all of the Old Testament (rightly understood in the various ways in which it applies to the new covenant age in the history of redemption) as well. In this broad sense, "all that Jesus commanded" includes the whole Bible when it is rightly understood and applied to the lives of believers living in the New Testament age (also called the new covenant age; see chaps. 3 and 8 below).

ing groups of Bible texts that bear on particular topics? Why (someone might object) can I not learn what God's will is, and learn about obeying Jesus's commandments, simply by reading through the Bible over and over? Why read a book on ethics or take a specific class in Christian ethics?

In reply, I agree that there is great benefit in regular Bible reading, especially in reading completely through the entire Bible again and again. By doing this, many Christians throughout history have led wonderful lives that truly brought glory to God, showed love to other people, demonstrated high standards of personal integrity, and resulted in a spiritual harvest of much fruit for the kingdom of God.

However, there are significant benefits that come from studying ethical topics in a focused way *in addition to* reading the Bible straight through or just studying individual passages or books.

a. Gaining a More Accurate Understanding of Ethics: Every Christian reading this book already has a set of ethical convictions, opinions, and ideas about what is morally right and wrong. These ethical beliefs have come from various sources—from an internal moral instinct (which God gives to every human being: Rom. 1:32; 2:14–16), family training, schools, traditions, and cultural beliefs. Christians also have formed ethical beliefs from their own Bible reading, from listening to sermons, and from conversations with friends.

But my hope is that this book will help Christians gain more accuracy in their ethical views, in three ways:

(1) Changing from Instinctive to Informed Ethical Convictions: I hope that Christians who already have ethical views that are consistent with Scripture will move from having *instinctive convictions* to having *well-informed convictions*. For example, a person reading chapter 21 might move from an instinctive conviction that abortion is morally wrong to a well-informed conviction, including knowledge of how various Bible passages and medical facts support that conviction. Such a reader would also gain a better understanding of some broader matters, such as how to apply different Scripture passages to various medical situations, and whether there are any situations to which the passages might not apply.

(2) Changing from Imprecise to Accurate Ethical Convictions: I hope that Christians who have a somewhat vague and *imprecise understanding* of an issue (for example, divorce and remarriage, covered in chap. 32) will come to a more *accurate* and well-defined understanding of how the teachings of the Bible apply to that issue (for example, to various specific marriage, divorce, and remarriage situations).

(3) Changing from Unbiblical to Biblical Ethical Convictions: I hope that Christians who have an *incorrect understanding* of the Bible's moral standards (as I will argue many Christians do with respect to lying and telling the truth, discussed in chap. 12) will be

persuaded to change their views and come to a moral conviction that is more faithful to Scripture.

Because of the large number of topics covered in a study of ethics and because of the great detail with which these topics are analyzed, it is inevitable that someone studying an ethics text or taking a course in ethics for the first time will have many personal beliefs challenged or modified, refined or enriched. It is of utmost importance, therefore, that each person beginning such a course firmly resolve in his or her mind to abandon as false any idea that is found to be clearly contradicted by the teaching of Scripture. But it is also important for each person to resolve not to believe any ethical position simply because this book or some other book or teacher says that it is true, unless the book or the instructor can convince the student from the text of Scripture itself. It is Scripture alone, not “conservative evangelical tradition” or the views of respected theologians or any other human authorities, that must function as the normative authority for our understanding of what God approves.

b. Using Our Time Wisely: Because we have limited lifetimes here on earth, we simply do not have enough time to carry out a detailed study of an important ethical topic every time a question arises. For example, if someone wonders what the whole Bible teaches about marriage and divorce, I could tell him, “Just keep reading your Bible and you’ll find out.” But if this questioner begins reading at Genesis 1:1, it will be a long time before he finds the passages that address divorce in Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, and by that time he will have many questions about other topics: animal sacrifices, capital punishment, wealth and poverty, and so forth.

Because of these time limitations, if we are to learn what the whole Bible teaches about ethical topics, we need to make use of the work of others who have searched through Scripture and proposed summaries on these various topics. Armed with such a study, I could send the person who asked me about divorce and remarriage to a list of about five key passages and one or two chapters in books that discuss that topic, and I could briefly summarize the common arguments for the two or three major positions. A basic overview and summary of that question can be read in an evening.¹⁷

c. Preparing to Face Real-Life Temptations: Training in sound principles of biblical ethics is best done before we are suddenly faced with a temptation and have to make a decision quickly (for example, a temptation to accept a bribe or tell a lie). In the Bible, Joseph had received some prior training in God’s moral standards that gave him the resolve to flee immediately out of the house when Potiphar’s wife grabbed his garment and said, “Lie with me” (Gen. 39:12). Jesus himself had “increased in wisdom” (Luke

¹⁷ For example, see “Divorce and Remarriage” in the *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2545–47. (I was the primary author of this article.) Similar brief overviews of 12 additional ethical topics are found on pp. 2535–60.

2:52) throughout his childhood and had “learned obedience” (Heb. 5:8) during his first 30 years before he faced the temptations of Satan in the wilderness (Luke 4:1–13). Studying ethics in advance equips us to make wise ethical decisions when new situations suddenly confront us.

d. Gaining a Better Ability to Make Wise Ethical Decisions about New Matters Later:

Studying Christian ethics helps us to *make better decisions later* on new questions of ethics that arise. We cannot know what new ethical controversies will develop in the churches in which we will live and minister 10, 20, or 30 years from now, if the Lord does not return before then. These new ethical controversies will sometimes include questions that no one has examined very extensively before. Christians will be asking, “What does the whole Bible say about this subject?”

Such new ethical questions seem to occur in every generation. For example, previous generations did not have to face questions about human cloning, embryonic stem cell research, surrogate motherhood, in vitro fertilization, methods of birth control, Internet privacy rights, and global warming. And questions about the roles of husbands and wives in marriage, and the roles of men and women in the church, have been far more controversial since the 1960s than at any previous time in history.

Whatever new ethical controversies arise in future years, those who have learned Christian ethics well (and also have learned systematic theology) will be much better able to address them. The reason for this is that everything that the Bible says is somehow related to everything else the Bible says (for it all fits together in a consistent way, at least within God’s own understanding of reality, and in the nature of God and creation as they really are). Thus, the new questions will be related to much that has already been learned from Scripture. The more thoroughly we have learned that earlier material, the better able we will be to deal with new questions.

A helpful analogy at this point is that of a jigsaw puzzle.¹⁸ If the puzzle represents what the whole Bible teaches us about every ethical question, then a course in Christian ethics represents filling in the border and several large sections of the puzzle. But we will never know everything that the Bible teaches about everything, so our jigsaw puzzle will have many gaps, many pieces that remain to be put in. Solving a new real-life problem is analogous to filling in another section of the jigsaw puzzle: the more pieces one has in place correctly to begin with, the easier it is to fit new pieces in, and the less apt one is to make mistakes.

In this book the goal is to enable Christians to put into their “ethical jigsaw puzzle” as many pieces with as much accuracy as possible, and then to encourage them to go on putting in more and more correct pieces for the rest of their lives. The teachings found in this book will act as guidelines to help in the future as Christians continue to fill in other areas that pertain to all aspects of obedience to God in all aspects of life.

¹⁸ I also used the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle for studying systematic theology; see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 29.

e. Growing toward Christian Maturity and Personal Holiness: There is no doubt in the minds of the New Testament authors that growing in our knowledge of biblical ethics, coupled with heartfelt obedience to what we are learning, is a major part of growing to maturity in our Christian faith.

The author of Hebrews explains that mature Christians are those who have many years of practice in learning and obeying sound ethical teachings: “But solid food is for *the mature*, for those who have their powers of discernment *trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil*” (Heb. 5:14).

Paul tells believers that he wants them to grow in their ethical discernment and in their obedience:

As you received from us *how you ought to walk and to please God*, just as you are doing, that you *do so more and more*. . . . For this is the will of God, your sanctification. (1 Thess. 4:1–3)

A major part of growing in Christian maturity is growing in personal holiness of life, a New Testament emphasis that is too seldom heard in many churches today. The author of Hebrews tells Christians to “*strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*” (Heb. 12:14).

Other passages also emphasize the need for Christians to grow in holiness of life:

Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, *bringing holiness to completion* in the fear of God. (2 Cor. 7:1)

Put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and *holiness*. (Eph. 4:24)

He disciplines us for our good, *that we may share his holiness*. (Heb. 12:10)

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be *in lives of holiness* and godliness. (2 Pet. 3:11)

The more we know about God and what he asks of his children, the better we will pray for his help and wisdom, and the more readily we will obey him. Studying Christian ethics rightly will make us more mature Christians and will result in greater personal holiness in our lives. If it does not do this, we are not studying it in the way God intends.

f. Evangelism: When Christians live in the midst of secular cultures that excuse and even glorify all kinds of sin, it is easy for them to feel embarrassed about mentioning Christian ethical standards to unbelievers and to feel reluctant to preach about biblical moral standards in church, lest non-Christians who are visiting become offended.

But that is not the perspective of the Bible. God’s moral standards are regularly viewed as a wonderful means of evangelism. Even in the time of the old covenant, Moses

told the people of Israel that the nations around them would hear of God's wise laws and would be amazed:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for *that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."* For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And *what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law* that I set before you today? (Deut. 4:5–8)

In the New Testament, the apostles often included a call to repent of sins in their evangelistic messages, as Paul did in his presentation to Greek philosophers in Athens:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now *he commands all people everywhere to repent*, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30–31)¹⁹

Peter knew that his hearers were often surrounded by hostile unbelievers who mocked and persecuted them, but he reminded them that their good conduct was a testimony that God would use to bring some of them to salvation (that is the most likely sense of “glorify God on the day of visitation”):²⁰

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable*, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and *glorify God on the day of visitation*. (1 Pet. 2:11–12)

Proclamation of God's moral standards to unbelievers is an essential component of evangelism for two reasons: (1) Unless they know God's moral standards, unbelievers will not be convicted that they have sinned against those standards, and therefore they will not repent of their sins and will not be saved. Preaching about God's moral standards leads unbelievers to be convicted of their sins, repent of their sins, and call out to Christ for forgiveness (see John 16:8 on the Holy Spirit's role in this). (2) Unbelievers still have a conscience that, by God's common grace, often bears witness that the moral

¹⁹ See also Paul's conversation with Felix in Acts 24:24–25 and Paul's long list of specific sins in his summary of the gospel message in Rom. 1:18–3:20. I discuss the New Testament emphasis on a call for repentance from sin in evangelistic preaching in “Free Grace” *Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 41–48.

²⁰ See Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 116–17.

standards that they are mocking and violating are, in fact, *good and true moral standards* to which they will be held accountable (see Rom. 1:32; 2:14–15).

Therefore, Christians should not be embarrassed about the Bible but should joyfully teach and graciously advocate its moral teachings as good—in fact, *wonderful*—standards that come from God himself.

D. MAJOR AND MINOR ETHICAL ISSUES

It is appropriate to ask what the difference is between a “major ethical issue” and a “minor ethical issue.” I have found the following guideline useful:

A major ethical issue is one that has a wide and long-lasting effect on our lives and the lives of others, and a minor ethical issue is one that has little effect on our lives and the lives of others.

According to this guideline, major ethical issues include such matters as marriage and divorce, homosexuality, abortion, and stewardship of money. By contrast, one’s views on cremation, vegetarianism, and how parents speak to their children about Santa Claus seem to me to be minor issues.

Of course, individual issues will fall along a spectrum from major to minor, and Christian churches and other organizations often have to make wise judgment calls about which issues they will count significant enough to be used as a basis for membership or leadership roles. The importance of an issue might even vary according to the historical circumstances and needs of the church at any given time. Christians will need to ask God to give them mature wisdom and sound judgment as they try to determine to what extent an ethical issue should be considered “major” in their particular circumstances.

E. SOME OBJECTIONS TO THIS KIND OF STUDY OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

1. Objection: “The Moral Teachings of the Bible are Inconsistent and Contradictory.”

Some scholars dismiss as simplistic or even naive any approach that claims that the teachings of the Bible can be understood in such a way that they do not contradict one another. For example, in a widely used textbook for Christian ethics, Robin Gill says:

Once the literal infallibility of every verse in the Bible is rejected, and contradictions and factual and moral errors, anachronisms and inconsistencies are claimed, the exponent of Christian ethics can no longer adequately base moral claims on particular proof-texts in the manner of Augustine, Luther, and, even at times, Aquinas.²¹

²¹ Robin Gill, *A Textbook of Christian Ethics*, 4th ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 10–11.

Four points can be made in response to this argument:

1. The objection is usually based on a different view of the nature of the Bible, namely, a nonevangelical or theologically “liberal” view that the writings of the Bible are *merely human words* that bear witness to an experience of God, and they are not also the very words of God. If they are merely human writings, then inconsistencies and contradictions are to be expected, as is the case among all other human writings from various authors and cultures.

But the claims of the Bible itself oppose this view. It insists that “*all Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16), and it claims that the words of the Lord are internally consistent, for “the *sum* of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Ps. 119:160).²² From that perspective, we are right to begin with the expectation that God would not speak to us in inconsistent or contradictory ways. When the Bible’s statements are combined, the result, the “sum,” is “truth.”

In personal conversation, it is important to ask the person making this objection to give specific examples to show exactly what “contradictions” and “moral and factual errors” he is referring to, or if he even has any specific ones in mind. This objection is sometimes made by those who—perhaps unconsciously—have adopted from modern Western culture a skeptical view of the possibility of finding universally true conclusions about *anything*, even about God and his moral standards in the Bible.

This type of skepticism regarding theological truth is especially common in the modern university world, where “ethics”—if it is studied at all—is not considered from the perspective of seeking to understand and submit to Scripture, but only from the perspectives of different theories of *philosophical ethics* and *historical ethics* (including perhaps a historical study of the various ideas that were believed by Christians such as Augustine and Martin Luther in previous generations). These fields of study (which have their own validity) can be comfortably carried out by taking into account only *human* writings and *human* reason, operating without a belief in a divinely authoritative Bible as our source for ethical standards.

But in this kind of intellectual climate in a secular university the study of “Christian ethics” as defined in this chapter would be considered impossible, because the Bible would be assumed to be merely the work of many *human authors* who wrote out of diverse cultures over the course of more than a thousand years. Therefore, trying to find “what the whole Bible teaches” about any ethical topic would be thought nearly as hopeless as trying to find “what all philosophers teach” or “what all politicians think” about some question. The answer in all cases would be assumed to be not one view but many diverse and often conflicting views.

Such a skeptical viewpoint from a secular worldview must be rejected by evangelicals

²² The Hebrew word translated “sum” in Ps. 119:160 is *ro’sh*, which here takes the meaning “sum” (BDB, 911, meaning 7), indicating the result when things are added together or combined, as in the expression, “Take a *census* of [KJV, “take the *sum* of”] all the congregation of the people of Israel” (Num. 1:2).

who see Scripture as the product of human *and* divine authorship, and therefore as a collection of writings that teach noncontradictory truths about God and the kind of conduct that he approves for the human beings he created.

2. A belief in the internal consistency of Scripture can hardly be thought to be simplistic or naive, for that was exactly the belief of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Christian church for the first 18 centuries (as Gill's reference to Augustine, Luther, and Aquinas indicates). Even following the advent of modern biblical criticism in the early 1800s, thousands of competent evangelical scholars up to the present day have held this view.

3. The claim that Scripture is internally inconsistent is too often only briefly asserted or simply assumed in discussions, with little detailed analysis. Yes, there are varying emphases that at first seem to create tensions between different parts of Scripture, such as between James and Paul on faith and works, or between Jesus's command to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) and Paul's teaching that the government official is to "bear the sword" (Rom. 13:4), but a simple rehearsal of those tensions does not constitute a persuasive argument showing that they cannot be resolved. In fact, much of the remainder of this book is concerned with seeking honest and reasonable resolutions to such tensions between passages that inform specific ethical issues.

4. In God's mind, his moral standards are all consistent with one another. Therefore, if we have accurately understood the teachings of God in Scripture, we should expect our conclusions to "fit together" and be mutually consistent. Internal consistency, then, is an argument for, not against, any individual results of Christian ethics.

2. Objection: "We Should Base the Study of Ethics on the Broad Principles of Scripture, Not on All the Specific Rules." A second objection to the kind of approach I take in this book comes from authors such as David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, who use a scheme of four levels of biblical teachings:

1. Particular judgments
2. Rules
3. Principles
4. Basic convictions²³

According to Gushee and Stassen, (1) the *particular judgments* tell what a specific person should do in a specific situation, such as, "Andrew should carry this Roman soldier's pack two miles." (2) The *rules* tell what to do in all such situations, such as, "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matt. 5:41, assuming a legal background in which Roman soldiers could compel citizens to carry burdens in this way). Rules give the reasons that support the particular judgments. (3) The

²³ David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 65–85; see summary graph on 70.

principles are more general and do not tell us what to do in specific situations, but give the reasons that support the rules. The principle that supports “go with him two miles” is “Love your enemies” (v. 44) or perhaps “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (22:39). (4) The *basic convictions* are beliefs about “God’s character, activity, and will, and about our nature as participants in that will.”²⁴ No reasons are needed to support basic convictions, for they are found in God. The basic conviction that supports loving one’s enemy is that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

On first impression, those levels seem useful. It is hard to deny that the Bible contains various kinds of more specific directions and more general ethical statements, and these four categories seem to be one helpful way of classifying them.²⁵ In addition, I think that Gushee and Stassen are right to insist that the *principles* of biblical ethics do not hang on thin air or mere human invention but are grounded in *basic convictions* about the character of God himself.²⁶

My objection to Gushee and Stassen, however, is that they claim that sometimes the *rules* of Scripture should be broken, and this can be justified by the broader *principles*. They write:

Exceptions are considered as a last, not first, resort. An exception is legitimate only if it is grounded in a principle or another rule that Jesus taught or that is found in Scripture.²⁷

Gushee and Stassen say that an ethical system that claims that we should always obey all the rules of Scripture is “legalism.” They say such an approach “reads the Bible looking for rules” and “sees God primarily as the rule-giver.” They also say the reason some people advocate such “legalism” is fear: “Legalists fear that exceptions to rules open the door to disastrous moral relativism and moral subjectivism.”²⁸

In spite of their objections, I maintain throughout this book that Christians today should obey *all* the rules *and all* the principles of Scripture that rightly apply to us in our specific situations. My belief is not based on a fear of moral relativism (as they say it must be). My conviction comes rather from the belief that the Bible itself claims that

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

²⁵ Where did Gushee and Stassen get these four levels of moral norms? They tell us, “Our approach to this issue is influenced heavily by philosophical efforts to clarify what people mean when they talk about morality,” and they point especially to philosophical ethicists Henry David Aiken and James Gustafson as the source for their understanding of the four levels in Christian ethics. Ibid., 65. My objection is not that these categories derive from philosophical ethics but that the way Gushee and Stassen use this classification to give permission to disobey some of the Bible’s “rules” seems foreign to the entire emphasis of Scripture on being completely obedient to all that God commands us.

²⁶ See their perceptive critique of modern secular ethical theories: “Contemporary philosophical ethics . . . rejects rooting principles in any theological basic conviction. Thus the principles exist, but, in our view, without a satisfactory support system to nourish them.” Ibid., 73–74.

²⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁸ Ibid.

all the ethical teachings of Scripture are God's authoritative words to human beings, and our task is to understand them rightly and to learn which ones of them apply to us in our specific situations today.²⁹ That is what I will attempt to do in this book, because it is not just *some* of Scripture (such as the broad principles and some rules), but "*all* Scripture" that Paul says is profitable for our moral instruction (2 Tim. 3:16).

I do not think that our task as Christian ethics teachers is to say that *sometimes* people are free to disobey *some* of God's specific rules that are addressed to people in *the same or substantially the same situation* that they are in. Saying that we may sometimes disobey makes it far too easy for Christians to stop struggling with difficult questions of how to apply certain scriptural "rules" that are unpopular today and just abandon those rules altogether in favor of some scriptural "principle" that can be found to nullify it.

For example, what about the rule "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov. 13:24)? For people who are uncomfortable with spanking disobedient children today, the approach of "obey the principles but not all the rules" would allow them to abandon it by appealing to the broader principle "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger" (Eph. 6:4).

What about the rule "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22)? If this seems uncomfortable today, then people can abandon it by an appeal to the scriptural principles of equality in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and the principle that "there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

What about the rule that the governmental authority is to use force ("the sword") to punish evil, according to Romans 13:4: "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"? Someone who is uncomfortable with such a use of force can abandon the rule by appeal to the principle "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), or even to another rule, such as "Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:39).

In this way, *any rule in Scripture* could be overcome by a creative interpreter, once the guideline of "obey the principles but not all the rules" is accepted. Scripture is so rich, so full of ethical teaching, that some "principle" could always be claimed to nullify a particular "rule."

But there is no guideline in the New Testament that says we are to follow just the principles, not all the rules. The authors of the New Testament Epistles assume that their readers are under obligation to obey *everything they write*, whether it is a general principle or a specific command. This is the case for a broad principle such as "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom. 13:9) and it is also the case for specific commands ("rules") such as "Pay . . . taxes to whom taxes are owed" (v. 7) or "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery" (Eph. 5:18).

At this point, the "broad principle" advocate might respond that there are so many

²⁹ I give a more extensive discussion of the problem of legalism in chap. 4, p. 117.

rules in Scripture that is it impossible to be consistent and obey all of them. I will reply more fully below, in a discussion of whether at times we are forced to choose the “lesser sin,”³⁰ but at this point two things may be said briefly:

1. Jesus obeyed all the rules and principles that applied to him fully and without exception. This was what frustrated his opponents so greatly: though the Pharisees were highly rule oriented and highly trained in Old Testament law, they could find no occasion when Jesus broke even the slightest of Old Testament rules. They could not answer his challenge, “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” (John 8:46).³¹ Therefore, the rules of Scripture do not necessarily conflict.

2. In the rest of this book, I will attempt to explain in detail how all the rules and principles of Scripture can be understood to apply in a consistent way to numerous real-life ethical situations. The objection “This cannot be done,” if it is to be persuasive, would have to demonstrate that this book argues incorrectly about the meaning of some passages and some of the rules, and that other books like this through the history of the church have done the same.

3. Objection: “People Who Claim to Base Ethics on the Whole Bible as the Words of God in Reality Use Only a ‘Canon within the Canon’ to Develop Their Positions.”

The “canon” of Scripture is an accepted list of all the books that belong in the Bible. The idea of a “canon within the canon” is the claim that some people use a “personal canon”—one’s favorite sections of Scripture, such as the teachings of Jesus or the writings of Paul—as the basis for ethical conclusions, rather than using all the books of the Bible (the whole canon).

Robin Gill gives voice to this objection:

It is difficult for even the most literalistic biblicist not to be operating in practice a “canon within the Canon”. That is, it is difficult to treat all parts of the Bible with equal seriousness and attention and not to be biblically selective.³²

In response, I would say:

1. In this book, I have not (at least not consciously) favored certain passages or parts of the Bible and ignored or minimized others. When treating specific topics, I have made an effort to interact with all the passages that might seem to be in tension with the viewpoint I have advocated. For example, when arguing for the moral goodness of private ownership of property, I have also attempted to treat fairly the “all things in common” passages in Acts (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37; see p. 898). When arguing for the moral legitimacy of the police and military power of civil government from Romans

³⁰ See chap. 7.

³¹ On several occasions, Jesus broke later rabbinic additions to the Sabbath commandment, and this caused conflict with his Jewish opponents, but he did not break the actual Old Testament Sabbath commandment as understood according to its true meaning and God’s original intent (see Mark 2:23–28).

³² Gill, *A Textbook of Christian Ethics*, 11.

13, I have also treated the “turn the other cheek” passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:39; see p. 431). That does not mean that I have concluded that these passages must remain in irreconcilable tension, for with each issue I propose a solution that views these passages as consistent and complementary. But it does mean that I am not ignoring those other passages by a process of selecting some kind of favorite “canon within the canon.” And many other evangelical ethicists have taken an approach similar to mine in their writings.³³

2. Most of my ethical conclusions in this book are not obscure, marginal viewpoints but are consistent with the positions advocated by the vast majority of recognized evangelical Protestant ethics writers since the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. All of these authors have implicitly or explicitly expressed an intention to reflect faithfully the testimony of *all* of Scripture, not just certain favorite portions. To object that all of these writers have somehow deceived themselves and unknowingly operated with a “canon within the canon” comes close to saying that it is impossible for any mature Christian teacher ever to interpret the Bible rightly on ethical issues. But that argument suggests that God has not given us a Bible that *any* of his people are able to understand rightly. In other words, such an argument is in the end a denial of the important doctrine of the clarity of Scripture.³⁴

3. Some passages of Scripture are more directly and evidently relevant for ethical study than others, and they will of course receive greater emphasis in this book. Just as a book about the Bible’s teaching on creation will give much attention to Genesis 1–3, a book about worship will give much attention to the Psalms, and a book about spiritual gifts will give much attention to 1 Corinthians 12–14, so a book about ethics will need to give more attention to passages of Scripture where ethical themes are emphasized, such as the Ten Commandments, Proverbs, the Sermon on the Mount, and several of the Epistles, such as Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, James, 1 Peter, and 1 John. However, such an emphasis does not show that I am operating with a canon within the canon. It is simply a necessary procedure because of the nature of the subject matter.

F. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS STUDY CHRISTIAN ETHICS?

How then should we study Christian ethics? The answers are similar to what I wrote in *Systematic Theology* about how we should study theology, because in both kinds of study we are seeking to learn what the whole Bible says about a particular topic (whether a

³³ See, for example, the ethics textbooks in the bibliography to this chapter by authors John Jefferson Davis, John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, John M. Frame, Norman L. Geisler, Carl F. H. Henry, David Clyde Jones, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Robertson McQuilkin and Paul Copan, John Murray, Scott B. Rae, and Cornelius Van Til. Such an approach was also taken by theologians who wrote about ethics in previous generations, such as Richard Baxter, John Calvin, and Charles Hodge.

³⁴ See chap. 3, p. 90, for a discussion of the clarity of Scripture.

theological or an ethical topic). The Bible itself provides some guidelines as to how we should study its teachings.

1. We Should Study Christian Ethics with Prayer. If studying Christian ethics is simply a certain way of studying the Bible, then the passages in Scripture that talk about the way in which we should study God's Word give us guidance in this task. Just as the psalmist prays in Psalm 119:18, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law," so we should pray and seek God's help in understanding his Word. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Studying ethics is a spiritual activity in which we need the help of the Holy Spirit.

No matter how intelligent a student is, if that student does not continue to pray for God to give him or her an understanding mind and a believing and humble heart, and if the student does not maintain a personal walk with the Lord, then he or she will misunderstand and disbelieve the teachings of Scripture, ethical error will result, and the mind and heart of the student will be changed not for the better but for the worse. Students of Christian ethics should resolve at the beginning to keep their lives free from any conscious disobedience to God or any known sin that would disrupt their relationship with him. They should resolve to maintain their own personal devotional lives with great regularity. They should continually pray for wisdom and understanding of Scripture.

Since it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability to understand Scripture rightly, we need to realize that the proper thing to do, particularly when we are unable to understand some passage or some doctrine of Scripture, is to pray for God's help. Often what we need is not more data but more insight into the data we already have available. This insight is given only by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 1:17–19).

2. We Should Study Christian Ethics with Humility. Peter tells us, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet. 5:5). Those who study Christian ethics will learn many things about the teachings of Scripture that are perhaps not known or not known well by other Christians in their churches or by relatives who are older in the Lord than they are. They may also find that they understand things about Scripture that some of their church officers do not understand, and that even their pastor has perhaps forgotten or never learned well.

In all of these situations, it would be easy to adopt an attitude of pride or superiority toward others who have not made such a study. But how ugly it would be if anyone were to use this knowledge of God's Word simply to win arguments, to put down a fellow Christian in conversation, or to make another believer feel insignificant in the Lord's work. James's counsel is good for us at this point: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness

of God” (James 1:19–20). He tells us that one’s understanding of Scripture is to be imparted in humility and love:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the *meekness of wisdom*. . . . But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13, 17–18)

The need for humility in studying ethics is also emphasized in Psalm 25:

Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads *the humble* in what is right,
and teaches *the humble* his way. (vv. 8–9)

Christian ethics rightly studied will not lead to the knowledge that “puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1) but to humility and love for others.

3. We Should Study Christian Ethics with Reason. Jesus and the New Testament authors will often quote a passage of Scripture and then draw logical conclusions from it (see, for example, Matt. 22:43–45; John 10:34–36; Rom. 10:10–11; 1 Tim. 5:17–18; and many other passages). They *reason* from Scripture. Their pattern of reasoning tells us that it is not wrong to use human understanding, human logic, and human reason to draw conclusions from the statements of Scripture. Nevertheless, when we reason and draw what we think to be correct logical deductions from Scripture, we sometimes make mistakes. The *deductions* we draw from the statements of Scripture are not equal to the *statements of Scripture* themselves in certainty or authority, for our ability to reason and draw conclusions is not the ultimate standard of truth—only Scripture is.

What then are the limits on our use of our reasoning abilities to draw deductions from the statements of Scripture? The fact that reasoning to conclusions that go beyond the mere statements of Scripture is appropriate and even necessary for studying Scripture, and the fact that Scripture itself is the ultimate standard of truth, combine to indicate to us that *we are free to use our reasoning abilities to draw deductions from any passage of Scripture so long as these deductions do not contradict the clear teaching of some other passage of Scripture*.³⁵

For example, we might read Paul’s instruction “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1) and conclude that we have an obligation to obey everything that the government tells us to do. But then we discover several narrative passages in which government authorities commanded God’s people to sin against him;

³⁵ This guideline is also adopted from Professor John M. Frame, from whom I learned it when I took classes from him at Westminster Seminary (see preface, p. 28).

however, God's people disobeyed the authorities, and the scriptural narratives view that disobedience with approval: see Exodus 1:15–22 (the Hebrew midwives); Esther 4:16 (Esther going into the king's presence uninvited); Daniel 3 (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to bow to the golden image); Daniel 6 (Daniel praying to God in disobedience to the king's command); Matthew 2:8, 12 (the wise men disobeying King Herod); and Acts 4:18–20; 5:29 (the apostles preaching the gospel). Therefore, we conclude that our first inference was incorrect, and to “be subject” to the government does not mean we must obey a governmental command to sin against God.

This principle (that we should not allow deductions from one passage of Scripture to contradict some other passage of Scripture) puts a safeguard on our use of what we think to be valid logical deductions from Scripture. Our supposedly logical deductions may be erroneous, but Scripture itself cannot be erroneous. When the psalmist says, “The *sum* of your word is truth; and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever” (Ps. 119:160), he implies that God's words are true not only individually but also when viewed together as a whole. Viewed collectively, their “sum” is also “truth.” Ultimately, there is no internal contradiction either in Scripture or in God's own thoughts.

4. We Should Study Christian Ethics with Help from Others. We need to be thankful that God has put teachers in the church (“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third *teachers* . . .” 1 Cor. 12:28). We should allow those with gifts of teaching to help us understand Scripture. This means that we should make use of books on Christian ethics that have been written by some of the teachers whom God has given to the church over the course of its history. It also means that our study of ethics should include talking with other Christians about the things we study. Among those with whom we talk will often be some with gifts of teaching, who can explain biblical truth clearly and help us understand it more easily. In fact, some of the most effective learning in Christian ethics courses in colleges and seminaries occurs outside the classroom in informal conversations among students who are attempting to understand the Bible's ethical teachings for themselves.

5. We Should Study Christian Ethics by Collecting and Understanding All the Relevant Passages of Scripture on Any Topic. This point was mentioned in our definition of Christian ethics at the beginning of the chapter, but the actual process needs to be described here. How does one go about making an ethical summary of what all the passages of Scripture on a certain topic teach?

For topics covered in this book, many people will think that studying this book and reading the Bible passages noted in the chapters is enough. But some people will want to do further study of Scripture on a particular topic or study some topic not covered here. How could a student go about using the Bible to research its teachings on some other subject, perhaps one not discussed explicitly in any Christian ethics textbook?

The process would look like this:

1. Find all the relevant passages. The best tool for this step is a good Bible-search program (or a printed concordance) that will enable a person to look up key words and find the passages in which the subject is treated.

For example, in studying a biblical approach to wealth and poverty, one will need to find all the passages containing words such as *wealth*, *wealthy*, *rich*, *riches*, *poverty*, and *poor*. Already this would be a long list, and if the list is too long to be manageable, the student will have to skim the word-search results without looking up the passages, or will have to divide the search into smaller sections or limit it in some other way. Then the student can find other passages by casting the net even wider, skimming over word-search results on other terms, such as *gold*, *silver*, *money*, *treasure*, *hunger*, *hungry*, *destitute*, *afflicted*, and so forth.

Passages can also be found by thinking through the overall history of the Bible and then turning to sections where there would be information on the topic at hand. For example, on the issue of wealth and poverty, a student would want to read passages about Solomon's wealth, Abraham's wealth, and Job's times of both wealth and poverty, as well as New Testament passages about Jesus's poverty (Matt. 8:20) and Paul's apparent indifference to his own wealth or poverty (Phil. 4:11–13).

Then, in addition to doing word searches and reading other passages that one can find on the subject, checking any related sections in some Christian ethics books will often bring to light other passages that have been missed.

2. The second step is to read, make notes on, and try to summarize the points made in the relevant passages. Sometimes a theme will be repeated often and the summary of the various passages will be relatively easy. At other times, some passages will be difficult to understand, and the student will need to take some time to study each one in depth (just by reading the passage in context over and over, or by using specialized tools such as commentaries and dictionaries) until a satisfactory understanding is reached.

3. Finally, the teachings of the various passages should be summarized into one or more points that the Bible affirms about that subject. The summary does not have to take the exact form of anyone else's conclusions on the subject, because we each may organize the subject differently or emphasize different things, or even see things in Scripture that others have missed.

At this point it is also helpful to read related sections, if any can be found, in several Christian ethics books. This provides a useful check against error and oversight, and often makes us aware of alternative perspectives and arguments that may cause us to modify or strengthen our position. If a student finds that others have argued for strongly differing conclusions, then these other views need to be stated fairly and then answered. Sometimes other ethics books will alert us to historical or philosophical considerations that have been raised in the history of the church, and these will provide additional insights or warnings against error. (At the end of each chapter in this book I have added a listing of the page numbers where the same topic is treated in up to 13 other evangelical textbooks on Christian ethics, which should make it much easier for a student to consult a number of other books on the same topic.)

The process outlined above is possible for any Christian who can read his or her Bible and can use a search program or simply look up words in a concordance. Of course, people will become faster and more accurate in this process with time and Christian maturity, but it would be a tremendous help to the church if Christians generally would give much more time to searching out topics in Scripture for themselves and drawing conclusions in the manner outlined above. The joy of discovery of biblical themes would be richly rewarding. Especially pastors and those who lead Bible studies would find added freshness in their understanding of Scripture and in their teaching.

6. We Should Study Christian Ethics with Rejoicing and Praise. The study of ethics is not merely a theoretical exercise of the intellect. It is a study of the amazingly good moral standards given by the living God and of the remarkable blessings of living in obedience to his commands. We cannot study this subject dispassionately! We must love all that God is, all that he says, and all that he does. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6:5).

God is not only seeking that we do the right actions in following his commandments. He also wants us to enjoy him, to enjoy living in fellowship with him, and to enjoy pleasing him in all that we do. He wants us to find deep and lasting joy and fulfillment in living ethical lives. This is, in fact, the only path to deep and lasting happiness in life—to live lives that are pleasing to God, walking every day in close fellowship with him:

Enoch *walked* with God, and he was not, for God took him. (Gen. 5:24)³⁶

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as *having pleased God*. (Heb. 11:5)

The Bible contains many words of praise to God for the excellence and wisdom of his moral standards and the blessings that come from walking in his ways. Therefore, in the study of the ethical teachings of God’s Word, it should not surprise us if we often find our hearts spontaneously breaking forth in expressions of praise and delight like those of the psalmists:

Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
 but his *delight* is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps. 1:1–2)

³⁶The LXX at Gen. 5:24 says Enoch was “pleasing” to God, using *euaresteō*, “to be pleasing,” as its translation of the Hebrew verb *hālak*, “to walk,” which occurs here in the hithpael stem with an iterative meaning, “to go to and fro, to walk about” (HALOT, 248), suggesting a pattern of walking with God over time. Heb. 11:5 echoes the LXX since it also uses *euaresteō* to say that Enoch “pleased God.”

The law of the LORD is perfect,
 reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
 making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
 enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
 enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
 and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
 even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
 and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
 in keeping them there is *great reward*. (Ps. 19:7–11)

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
 who walk in the law of the LORD!
Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
 who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
 but walk in his ways! (Ps 119:1–3)

In the way of your testimonies I *delight*
 as much as in *all riches*. (Ps. 119:14)

How *sweet* are your words to my taste,
 sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:103)

Your testimonies are my heritage forever,
 for they are *the joy of my heart*. (Ps. 119:111)

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

The questions at the end of each chapter focus on application to life. Because I think ethical study is to be felt at the emotional level as well as understood at the intellectual level, in many chapters I have included some questions about how a reader *feels* regarding a point of ethics. I think these questions will prove valuable for those who take the time to reflect on them.

1. In what ways (if any) has this chapter changed your understanding of what Christian ethics is? What was your attitude toward the study of Christian ethics before reading this chapter? What is your attitude now?
2. What is likely to happen to a church or denomination that gives up learning Christian ethics for a generation or longer? Has that been true of your church?
3. Are there any topics listed in the table of contents for which a fuller understanding would help to solve a personal difficulty in your life at the present time? What are the spiritual and emotional dangers that you personally need to be aware of in studying Christian ethics?
4. Pray for God to make this study of Christian ethics a time of spiritual growth and deeper fellowship with God, and a time in which you personally grow to please him in your conduct of life more than ever before.

SPECIAL TERMS

canon within the canon
Christian ethics
deontological systems
historical ethics
major ethical issue
minor ethical issue
philosophical ethics
relativism
situation ethics
teleological systems
theological ethics
virtue ethics

BIBLIOGRAPHY

In the bibliographies following each chapter, I have emphasized works written from a conservative evangelical position (broadly defined). This is because the purpose of this section is to give the student ready access to other treatments of each topic by ethics writers who share my general convictions about the nature of Scripture—that all of it is totally truthful and that it is God’s unique and absolutely authoritative Word to us. Once we step outside of that conviction, the basis for making ethical decisions is far different.

I have also included some Roman Catholic resources (especially the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) because of the great influence of the Roman Catholic Church in almost every society in the world.

In addition, in some chapters that deal extensively with the evaluation of facts from

the world around us (such as racial discrimination, self-defense, wealth and poverty, and stewardship of the environment), I have also included some books by secular writers that are relevant to those topics.

Sections in Other Ethics Texts

At the end of each chapter, I have listed page numbers in 13 other commonly used ethics texts where the same topic is covered. (Full bibliographical information for these 13 books is provided in this chapter only.)

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Students have repeatedly mentioned that one of the most valuable parts of any of their courses in college or seminary has been the Scripture passages they were required to memorize. “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11). In each chapter, therefore, I have included an appropriate memory passage so that instructors may incorporate Scripture memory into the course requirements wherever possible. (Scripture memory passages at the end of each chapter are taken from the ESV.)

Colossians 1:9–10: And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

HYMN

Christian ethics at its best will result in praise, because God's moral commands flow from his character, and his character is holy, righteous, infinitely good, and most beautiful. The author of Psalm 119 realized this, for he exclaimed, "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" and "My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes" (Ps. 119:97, 171).

I will argue in chapter 4 that the kind of life that glorifies God is "a life of obedience to God, lived in personal relationship with God." But regular times of worship are an important help in refreshing and deepening our day-by-day relationship with God, and hymns of praise are also a wonderful means of expressing the joy we feel when we are aware of God's presence.

It is appropriate, therefore, at the end of each chapter to include a hymn, often one that is related to the subject of that chapter. In a classroom setting, the hymn can be sung together at the beginning or end of class. Alternatively, an individual reader can sing it privately or simply meditate quietly on the words.

For almost every chapter the words of the hymns were found in *Great Hymns of the Faith*,³⁷ but most of them are found in many other common hymnals. Unless otherwise noted, the words of these hymns are now in the public domain and no longer subject to copyright restrictions: therefore, they may be freely copied for public use.

Why have I used so many old hymns? Although I personally like many of the more recent worship songs that have come into wide use, when I began to select hymns that would correspond to the great ethical teachings of Scripture, I realized that the great hymns of the church throughout history have a richness and breadth that is still unequaled. Perhaps this can be a challenge to modern songwriters to study these chapters and then write songs reflecting the teaching of Scripture on the respective subjects.

"Holy, Holy, Holy"

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
Who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,
Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see,

³⁷ John W. Peterson, ed., *Great Hymns of the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1969).

Only thou art holy; there is none beside thee
Perfect in pow'r, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

AUTHOR: REGINALD HEBER, 1826

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