



# Making Moral Decisions

## SESSION 3

| *Forms of the Ethical Norm: Rules, Cases, and Ideals*

### Introduction

In this session we will be examining various ways in which moral guidance can be developed. Just as there are various sources of moral guidance so too there are different forms of moral norms, each having its own significance and usefulness. Some communities find some methods of establishing and communicating moral obligations more suitable than other methods. Civil law, for instance, must be specific about what constitutes legal obligations. If the law is too vague, then it can be interpreted in several ways, resulting in loopholes, exploitation of the law, and failure to accomplish what it was intended to accomplish. If the law's expectation is too high, then such a law is overdemanding and needs to be relegislated or overturned, because it can punish people for failing at duties they cannot fulfill. Congress would be amiss to pass legislation requiring every citizen to be perfect because no one could attain perfection. Civic law must also be very hesitant to pass judgments on motives. Inner thoughts are private matters; therefore, laws that seek to require or punish attitudes are highly problematic. Only illegal *actions* that flow from such attitudes should be subject to legal sanctions.

Religious morality is not necessarily the same as civic morality. Religious morality can set moral goals that stretch people beyond merely cautious and achievable moral behavior, which makes room for the inspiring as well as for the demanding, for the visionary as well as the routinely ordinary. Jesus is quite understandable in religious terms when he says to his followers "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). This way of thinking can be described as idealistic—not meaning it is so unrealistic as to be discounted,



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but rather than it is so conceptually grand as to be inspiring. The form of the norm—the manner in which moral responsibility is portrayed—is exceedingly important and greatly affects how morality is understood.

### Ethical Guidance in the Old Testament

There are three ways of teaching moral responsibility found in the Bible. There are codes—specific rules for behaving in a certain way; there are case studies that suggest how to take circumstances into account when seeking to be responsible; and there are ideals, which offer a vision of moral responsibility that lies beyond the reach of ordinary attainment. Because the Bible contains all three kinds of guidance and sheds light on the differences between them, it is a marvelous resource for helping us to be moral in a humane way, which is one of the most important aspects of what it means to be faithful.

To say the Bible is a source of moral guidance makes many think of the Ten Commandments. These are found in Exodus 20:1–17 and again in Deuteronomy 5:8–21.

(Some of the Ten Commandments deal with matters of religious devotion, which means they are not a statement of merely ethical warnings that would make them suitable to be civic icons.) Viewed in one way the various commandments seem to be like rules, offering specific measures for behavior—in several cases by specifying what is forbidden rather than what is required. But they are quite general in their meaning. For instance, one of them forbids stealing but does not spell out just what constitutes stealing; another forbids false witness, but does not indicate just what constitutes false witness; yet another forbids adultery but does not spell out exactly what constitutes adultery. It is left to subsequent interpreters to spell out just what the commandments either condone or forbid—as many such interpreters have done throughout the course of Christian history.

Consider, for instance, the prohibition of murder, which in some translations is a prohibition of killing: is this a mandate for vegetarianism (assuming the harvesting of growing plants is not forbidden but the killing of non-plant life is)? Does it prohibit self-defense or the use of the sword as an instrument for preserving order or protecting the neighbor? Is it, or is it not, a condemnation against using the death penalty as an instrument of legal retaliation? If you look ahead to Exodus 21:18 and the several verses that follow, you will find early efforts to be more specific about the implications of the commandment not to kill. Here, starting with verse 18, a distinction is drawn between cold-blooded murder and manslaughter; between the striking of a slave (considered property at the time) and striking a member of the covenant group. These formulations, part of what scholars call the Covenant Code, are efforts to be more precise about when and under what circumstance killing is a punishable act. Some of the provisions are still, and understandably so, basic to our contemporary civic laws. Other provisions in this section of Exodus—such as the assumed acceptance of slavery—have long since been understood as contrary to the public welfare.

In most religious education we teach the Ten Commandments more frequently than we examine the Covenant Code. Doing that is not enough to raise the level of moral sophistication. Attention should also be given to the Covenant Code, which reveals a wise and judicial mind at work—admittedly attuned to the mores of an ancient time—seeking to be more thoughtful about what killing is, the forms that stealing can take, and how

## EXODUS 23:9–11

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

these transgressions are to be discerned and dealt with. Attention to cases is an important model we would do well to appropriate as we think about the moral issues that confront us. For instance, Exodus 23:9 might have much to contribute to how we deal with the U.S. immigration controversy, and 23:10–11 might well inform us about how we should care for nature. The Ten Commandments, read only by themselves, might not direct attention to these contemporary issues.

Scholars often distinguish between the form of the Ten Commandments and the form of the Covenant Code. They call the first “didactic;” the second, “casuistic.” “Didactic” means teaching or instructional; “casuistic” means paying attention to cases and circumstances. The commandments set forth general requirements that are enunciated without regard to particular situations; the Covenant Code examines the implications of the commandments for the specific circumstances in which the people live. It is impossible to be morally mature without grasping the importance of both approaches. Faith has just as much to do with how norms are applied as it does to what those norms are. Simply to teach moral norms without also teaching how faith governs the manner in which they can be applied is to leave people ignorant of what it means to be morally faithful.

## Ethical Guidance in the New Testament

The best place to look in the New Testament for moral responsibility is the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s collection of crucially important aspects of the teaching of Jesus found in chapters 5 through 7. Chapter 5 of Matthew begins with the Beatitudes, a series of nine brief descriptions of what it means to be blessed—that is, what



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it means to practice moral behavior in an ideal manner. These portrayals of moral fidelity are rich, marvelous, and challenging—but they leave open the question as to what blessedness looks like in terms of concrete behavior. What does one do to be poor in spirit, or to be meek, or to be hungry for the sake of righteousness? Are there any measurable tests of success? Perhaps one can feel morally successful if one gets persecuted for taking some heroic stand. But some people get persecuted for being pests rather than being prophets, and it is often impossible to sort out the one from the other with absolute certainty. To raise these issues is not to deny the grandeur of the vision, but rather to ask how the visionary ideals can be translated into specific behavior. The Beatitudes are followed by three verses that also give ideals, suggesting that Christian behavior is like the salt that makes food tasty or like the light that enables things to be seen.

The Sermon on the Mount then goes into a series of contrasts that highlight the difference between being moral the traditional way and being moral in a new and unique way. Each of these contrasts begins “You have heard it said of old, but I [Jesus] say to you. . . .” Each of these contrasts takes up some provision of the old law and reconfigures it into an ideal expectation. The old law prohibits murder; the new law prohibits even anger. The old law prohibits adultery; the new law rules out adulterous feelings. The old law rules out harshness in divorce; the new law rules out divorce altogether. The old law rules out swearing falsely; the new law rules out all swearing (and by inference all other kinds of deceit). The old law condones revenge (and eye for an eye); the new law rules out any and all retaliation. The old

law accepts the custom by which Roman soldiers could require citizens to carry a soldier’s pack one mile; the new law doubles that. The old law permitted hatred of enemies, the new law urges us to love them and to overcome their hostility with kindness.

In each of these contrasts a prudent and fulfillable obligation is replaced with an exceedingly demanding one. Few, if any of us, can fulfill the new law. The new law, therefore, means that moral achievement is not a means for meriting salvation. Jesus framed moral duty in a way that precludes works/righteousness as the way to salvation. We are not saved by our good behavior.

In other places in the New Testament moral guidance is given through the use of parables. Parables function somewhat like case studies, but are even richer. They portray exemplary or ideal behavior by using examples. In many ways they are unique in the way they help us appreciate what is morally helpful. Their guidance differs from that offered by codes or rules, and it prompts imaginative thinking about what is morally important.

Ideals can be set forth by example as well as by words. The behavior of Jesus is just as important for ethical guidance as what he taught—if not more so. Jesus cared for all sorts and conditions of people and hence was more popular among outcasts and sinners than with those who claimed to be religiously righteous. In doing this he ignored distinctions society often makes between “good folk” and others. He was open to women and children in a culture that relegated them to subordinate social standing. He was critical of religious pretense and refused to use power in the way it is exercised by political leaders. He gave us a vision of the ideal by means of unique behavior rather than verbal description. What Jesus *did* is as important for moral thinking as what Jesus *said*.

The New Testament contains some moral teaching that comes in the form of rules (or codes). This teaching may not be the most important part of the New Testament, but it cannot be ignored. Colossians 3:18–4:1 and Ephesians 5:21–6:9 are called “household codes” by scholars. These are characterized by the acceptance and approval of hierarchical differences but seek to avoid the misuse of those differences by requiring mutual obligations between those considered superiors and those considered inferiors. These have often been used to endorse the

idea of domination and submission in human relationships, but they also declare there must be reciprocity in which submission is counterbalanced by care and concern. When these are read by people in authority they are often taken to endorse domination. Experience tells us that only when subordinates have voice and standing are they likely to be treated fairly.

## Using All Forms of Moral Guidance

What, then, can we learn from the fact that moral guidance can come in so many different forms? Should we think through which of them is best and adopt it as the only way to learn what is morally right and helpful? Or does the fact that moral guidance comes in these many forms constitute a very important aspect of seeking to know what is good and fitting? Efforts to be moral in strict, unflinching, and totally certain ways tend to emphasize rules. The impulse to moral guidance can then become unbearably demanding, hostile to freedom, and opposed to any deviation from a fixed and static norm. The world—especially the religious parts of that world—is full of efforts that attempt to do just that. They give moral earnestness a bad name.

Rules, cases, and ideals all make a contribution to our moral understanding, not least because they make moral decision-making a venture of trust and fidelity rather than an unreflective way of conforming to just one measure of how to behave. We must pay attention to all three forms of ethical guidance and respond appropriately to each even if it sometimes means giving more credibility to one at the expense of the others. But it also means not letting any one way of formulating ethical guidance be overbearing. That is what Christian freedom is about. It involves reflection rather than mere submission, seeking what is ultimately the best rather than settling for just one way of knowing what is good. Christian freedom is never content with a convenient or partial accomplishment when more searching would result in more profound understanding and more rewarding behavior. It knows that perfection may be possible—but is reserved only for God—and therefore never adopts some limited and partial way of thinking as the full measure of what it means to be morally faithful.

## About the Writer

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