

## Ethical Theories by Joe Carter

### Articles 1-3

#### Understanding ethical systems: Biblical ethics

Editor's note: This is the first article in a series on what Christians should know about ethical theories.

“We have two kinds of morality side by side,” said the philosopher Bertrand Russell, “one which we preach but do not practice, and the other which we practice but seldom preach.” Russell was an atheist, but his aphorism is all too applicable to many Christians. Too often we preach a type of moral theory that not only differs radically from that which we practice, but with which we would not want to be associated. For example, we would rightfully reject—at least in what we “preach”—that “the end justifies the means.” But in practice we do tend to justify the unjustifiable if it leads to an outcome that we desired. To bring our preaching more in line with our practice, we need to develop a clearer idea of ethical systems and how they are connected to the Christian faith.

Ethics is the study and application of moral principles that govern a person's behavior or conduct. The sub-branch that focuses on what action a person should take is normative ethics. In this series, we'll look at several of the most common ethical systems within normative ethics (such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics), consider their strengths and weaknesses, and compare them to a baseline standard, which we'll call “biblical ethics.” By developing a clearer understanding of ethical systems, we can better understand how to apply them in our own lives—or whether they should be rejected entirely.

What is Christian ethics?

This application of ethics in our everyday lives primarily involves the process of moral decision-making, a process which requires us to primarily answer two questions: “What should we do?” and “What should we be?” For a Christian, the answer to those questions should ultimately be: “What God has commanded me to do—to obey him” and “What Jesus wants me to be—to be more like him.”

In John 14:15, Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” That's not a suggestion—Jesus framed it as an imperative. Those who love Jesus will keep his commandments. The corollary is that those who do not keep his commandments do not truly love Jesus. Loving Jesus is the minimal standard for identifying as a Christian. If you do not truly love Jesus—if you do not even attempt to keep his commandments—you should not call yourself a Christian.

The central paradigm for Christian ethics is thus union with and conformity to Jesus, primarily through the Spirit-driven process of obeying all that Jesus has commanded of us. As the Christian ethicist John Murray said, “If ethics is concerned with manner of life and behavior, biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behavior which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces.”

Because Christian ethics should be rooted in Scripture, all Christian ethics should be biblical ethics. But because that is not always the case, we'll use the term biblical ethics to refer to a specific form of biblically based Christians ethics.

What exactly is biblical ethics?

Biblical ethics, as defined by Murray, is the study and application of the morals prescribed in God's Word that pertain to the kind of conduct, character, and goals required of one who professes to be in a redemptive relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Biblical ethics is bibliocentric (Scripture-centered), theocentric (God-centered), and Christocentric (Jesus-centered). As David W. Jones explains in *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, this means our approach to biblical ethics should:

Not only describe what the Bible says but treat what it says as authoritative, inerrant, relevant, and necessary;

Not only accept biblical teaching as a good way of doing things but as applying eternal, divine, moral laws to everyday life; and

Not only embrace a theistic worldview but affirms the uniqueness of Christ as the way, the truth, and the life—not only for Christians but for everyone everywhere.

There are at least five distinctives of biblical ethics, says Jones, that make it different than other ethical systems:

1. Biblical ethics is built on an objective, theistic worldview. In other words, biblical ethics assumes the presence of a fixed moral order in the world that proceeds from God. Therefore, advocates of biblical ethics affirm the existence of universal, moral absolutes.
2. Biblical ethics is not a means of earning favor with God but rather is the natural result of righteousness already imputed by God.
3. Biblical ethics seeks to recognize and to participate in God's moral order already present within the created order and in special revelation.
4. Biblical ethics affirms that immorality stems from human depravity, and not primarily from man's ignorance of ethics or from socioeconomic conditions.
5. Biblical ethics is the process of assigning moral praise or blame, and incorporates conduct (that is, the what), character (the who), and goals (the why) of individuals involved in moral events.

All three of these last three elements—conduct, character, and goals—are interrelated and can be visualized in this moral events triangle, says Jones.

The first corner of the moral events triangle corresponds to conduct, that is, the “practice” of moral events. Moral conduct is based on an ethical rule or principle and focuses on external acts and behavior. Conduct is typically an orientation of person-to-person.

The second corner of the triangle stands for character, that is, the “person” of moral events, and focuses on motives and internal disposition. Character deals with the things inside each person—that is, a person's self-relations. Character is an orientation of person-to-self.

The third corner of the triangle represents goals or the “purpose” of moral events, which is oriented toward a purpose and focuses on design or intended end. In biblical ethics goals deal with relations between man and God. Goals are an orientation of person-to-God.

Our character and our conduct are ultimately oriented toward the end goal of biblical ethics—the glorification of God. In John 14:21 Jesus taught his disciples, “The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.” And in Matthew 5:16, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his listeners, “In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Therefore, a primary way Christians love and glorify God is to keep his commands and perform the good works that flow from godly character and actions.

How do we know when an action is moral?

In determining whether an action is moral, we first start at the top of the moral events triangle with conduct, the “practice” of moral events. When faced with a moral scenario, the first question that should be asked is, “What ethical rules or principles apply in this particular situation?” We must know and understand the rules/principles as well as the relevant facts and context about the situation, what we’ll call the “fact pattern.”

Once the applicable moral norms are identified we then move to the next point on the triangle, which concerns character—the “person” of moral events. In the process of making a moral decision, believers ought to consider their motives and ask the question, “Am I acting out of love for God and love for neighbor?”

Finally, we get to the last step in the process of moral decision making. As we noted earlier, the end goal of biblical ethics is the glorification of God, so we need to answer the question, “What path, choice, or answer would bring the most glory to God?”

A primary way Christians love and glorify God is to keep his commands and perform the good works that flow from godly character and actions.

The right path is to keep the moral law out of a love for God and neighbor with the intent of bringing glory to God. We also need to make sure we have the proper order and connection between love of God and love of neighbor: Love of God comes first, and love of God leads to love of neighbor.

In the next article in this series, we’ll look at moral decision-making, including how we know which rules or principles apply to a given situation, what we do when moral acts conflict, and the role of conscience.

## **Article #2**

### **Understanding ethical systems: Biblical ethics (Part 2)**

Editor’s note: This is the second article in a series on what Christians should know about ethical theories.

In this series, we’re looking at several of the most common ethical systems within normative ethics (such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics), considering their strengths and weaknesses, and comparing them to a baseline standard, which we’ll call “biblical ethics.” The first article explained what biblical ethics is and how we know an action is moral. In this article we’ll examine moral decision-making, including how we know which biblical rules or principles apply to a given situation and what we do when moral acts conflict.

How do we know which rules or principles apply to a given situation?

As pertains to moral decision-making, the Bible should be understood as a revelation of God’s commands, principles, and virtues. God’s moral instruction comes to us in the form of commands and principles and is also revealed in Christian virtues and examples (particularly in the example of Jesus). We should therefore prioritize commands because they help us to most clearly understand God’s standards for our conduct. They also help us determine how principles and virtues are to be applied.

Within Scripture we find two basic categories of commands: broad (or general) commands and narrow (or specific) commands. Broad/general commands typically apply to many situations,

such as the command to love our neighbor, and always apply in some way to all cultures and all contexts.

Narrow or specific commands relate to a particular circumstance, often in a culture that differs from our own. An example is Deuteronomy 22:8, which says, “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.” An application in our day might be to build a fence around your backyard pool so that a neighbor’s child doesn’t fall in and drown.

Narrow commands might not always apply to all cultures and all contexts. In some cases (as with the example above) there might be a parallel application. Narrow commands are similar to “case law” (i.e., law as established by the outcome of former cases) in that they give us paradigmatic examples for situations we might encounter.

In determining how a command applies we must consider the reason for the command. If the reason for the command is a theological principle that is always true, then the rule will almost always apply today. As a general rule, if the Old Testament gives a moral command it is still in effect unless later canceled, either explicitly or implicitly, in the New Testament.

Sometimes it is rather obvious how a command in Scripture can be applied. But oftentimes, to determine whether an action or circumstance is similar to an action judged to be wrong in Scripture, we must use analogical reasoning. In his essay “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics,” James Gustafson states the commonly accepted method of scriptural analogy: Those actions of persons and groups are to be judged morally wrong which are similar to actions that are judged to be wrong or against God’s will under similar circumstances in Scripture, or are discordant with actions judged to be right or in accord with God’s will in Scripture.

An example of how to use analogical reasoning would be to consider the question of whether abortion is immoral. Our first step would be to ask, “What ethical rules or principles apply in this situation?” For this question, the answer is rather straightforward since the Bible has a clear command that prohibits the taking of innocent life.

The command was given by God to Moses as one of the Ten Commandments on two separate occasions (Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17). In the New Testament, we also find the commandment reconfirmed by Jesus (Matthew 5:21), and reiterated by his apostle, Paul (Romans 13:9). As pastor-theologian Kevin DeYoung notes, the sixth commandment prohibits much more than just cold-blooded, premeditated murder. It prohibits killing or causing to be killed, by direct action or inaction, any legally innocent human.

An elective abortion (as opposed to a spontaneous abortion, or miscarriage) is the killing of an innocent human being. Based on scientific knowledge of human development, we know a human embryo/fetus is an actual human being and that human life begins at fertilization/conception. Several passages in the Bible also strongly suggest that human life begins at conception (cf. Job 31:13-15; Psalms 51:5; 139:13-16; Matthew 1:20). Because elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being, abortion is prohibited by God under the sixth commandment.

What do we do when moral acts conflict?

There may be times when we may find that two or more moral commands or principles appear to be in conflict. An oft-used example is the “Nazi at the door” problem:

Imagine that you are living in World War II Germany and are hiding a family of Jews in your basement. A Nazi SS soldier comes to your door and asks if there are any Jews in your home. On the one hand, you know it is morally wrong to lie. On the other hand, you also know it

would be morally wrong to answer in a way that would get the family killed. What should you do?

There are three ways to resolve this issue. The first is to determine whether there is an actual moral conflict. The second is to conclude that true ethical conflicts cannot exist. The third is to determine the hierarchy of commands.

Many Christians—including me—would say that in this particular situation there is no moral conflict because there is no lie being told. A lie is an intentional falsehood that violates someone’s right to know the truth. I’m convinced there are cases in which people forfeit their right to know the truth. The Nazi at the door has forfeited his right to know the truth about whether you have Jews in your home because he has a nefarious intent. It would be similar to the Hebrew midwives who deceived Pharaoh when he wanted to kill all newborn male babies (Exodus 1:17–21).

If there was an actual moral conflict (because you believe failing to acknowledge the Jews hidden in your home would be lying to the Nazi), then we have to apply the second or third approaches. The second approach is called “non-conflicting absolutism.” It denies that a true ethical conflict can even exist and claims that any perceived conflict is a result of human misinterpretation. Under this view, if we have a perfect view of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ any illusion of conflict is dispelled. The problem, of course, is that we have no perfect view and so it is not clear how we would know what decision to make under this perspective. This is why the non-conflicting absolutism is rarely held by Christian ethicists.

The third approach is called “hierarchicalism” (or graded absolutism). This view holds that moral conflict can exist and that when ethical laws are in conflict a “right” choice is available through a hierarchy of principles found in Scripture. Under hierarchicalism, if one duty clearly has priority, we must choose that duty. Even if we believed that we would be lying to the Nazi and that it would be morally wrong, the duty to protect the lives of the Jewish family would take priority. According to hierarchicalism, as long as we follow the higher moral law, we are not held responsible for failing to keep the lower-level command. Also, under hierarchicalism, if both duties appear to have equal priority, we are free to obey either duty (though we need to be certain they are indeed of equal priority).

Hierarchicalism has solid biblical support, as even Jesus prioritized some rules and commands when they appear to come into conflict (see, for example, Matthew 12:9-13). It’s important to remember that hierarchicalism is about selecting the better of two goods, not choosing the “lesser of two evils.” We are not called to choose any evil—even a lesser one. We are not called to choose an evil that good may come.

What is the process for moral decision-making?

We can put all of this together to devise a seven-step process for making moral decisions:

1. Pray for divine guidance — Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate the process and to help you act in a way that glorifies God.
2. Clarify the ethical issues or problems — Make sure you understand the relevant factors (e.g., context, facts) that help clarify or define the ethical issue or problem.
3. Gather the scriptural data on the issue — Determine what commands, principle(s), and examples are most relevant to the issue.
4. Determine how to apply the biblical instruction — Once the applicable rules are understood, decide how they should be applied.
5. Determine the hierarchy — If necessary, determine the hierarchy of commands that would need to be applied.

6. Consult the community of the faithful — There are few situations you will face in this life that are entirely novel. Consult with mature believers and those with expertise on the issue (such as Christian ethicists) about what you should do.
7. Formulate a Christian ethical position — With prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit and the community of faithful believers, make a determination about what moral position is most glorifying to God.

This may initially seem like a labor-intensive process, and too burdensome for use in real life. But once we develop a solid grasp of God’s commands and the relevant fact patterns, the process often becomes rather straight-forward.

In the next article in this series, we’ll wrap up our focus on biblical ethics by considering the role of conscience. The remaining articles in this series will then compare and contrast other ethical systems—deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics—to the biblical standard.

### Article 3

#### Understanding ethical systems: Biblical ethics (Part 3)

Editor’s note: This is the third article in a series on what Christians should know about ethical theories.

In this series, we’re looking at several of the most common ethical systems within normative ethics (such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics), considering their strengths and weaknesses, and comparing them to a baseline standard, which we’ll call “biblical ethics.” The first article explained what biblical ethics is and how we know an action is moral. The second article examined moral decision-making, including how we know which biblical rules or principles apply to a given situation and what we do when moral acts conflict. This article wraps up our focus on biblical ethics by considering the role of conscience.

What is the role of conscience in moral decision making?

The general concept of conscience can be found in almost every human culture, but it has a unique and distinctive meaning for Christians. The Greek term for conscience, *suneidesis*, occurs more than two dozen times, and serves an important concept, particularly in the Pauline epistles. If we examine the way Scripture talks about conscience, we uncover five general themes

1. Conscience is an internal rational capacity that bears witness to our value system. — A few decades ago, a common trope in movies and cartoons was the shoulder angel/devil. A person’s inner turmoil was personified by having an angel, representing conscience, on the right shoulder and a devil, representing temptation, on the left shoulder. This type of folklore imagery gave people the false impression that the conscience was like an inner listening room in which a person could hear the voice of God (a “good conscience”) or the devil (a “bad conscience).

A more biblical view is to consider the shoulder angel/devil as representing witnesses to our inner value system. Our conscience is a part of our God-given internal faculties, a critical inner awareness that bears witness to the norms and values we recognize when determining right or wrong. Conscience does not serve as a judge or a legislator; that is a modern take on the concept. Instead, in the biblical sense, conscience serves as a witness to what we already know (Romans 2:15, 9:1).

Conscience may induce an inner dialogue to tell us what we already know, but more often it merely makes its presence known through our emotions. When we conform to the values of

our conscience, we feel a sense of pleasure or relief. But when we violate the values of our conscience, it induces anguish or guilt.

2. Conscience is a trustworthy guide only when it is informed and ruled by God. — A few days before he became a candidate for the U.S. Senate in 2004, Barack Obama sat down with religion reporter Cathleen Falsani to talk about his faith. When Falsani asked, “What is sin?” Obama replied, “Being out of alignment with my values.” While there is a lot wrong, theologically speaking, with that answer, it does contain a kernel of truth. What Obama was describing as “being out of alignment with my values” is what we could call “violating our conscience.”

To violate one’s conscience is indeed a sin (as we’ll discuss in a moment). But what makes something a sin is not merely “being out of alignment with our values” but in choosing our own will over the will of God. Our conscience is therefore only trustworthy when it does not lead us to choose our will over God’s will. As the late theologian R.C. Sproul explained, [W]e have to remember that acting according to conscience may sometimes be sin as well. If the conscience is misinformed, then we seek the reasons for this misinformation. Is it misinformed because the person has been negligent in studying the Word of God?

A prime example of the way our conscience may lead both Christians and non-Christians to sin is when we violate, or advocate for the violation, of creation ordinances. Among the creation ordinances are the clear injunctions to preserve the sanctity of the marriage bond between one man and one woman and the necessity and propriety of godly labor (Genesis 2:1-3, 15). Our conscience bears witness to the reality and truth of these ordinances, and we are guilty of sin when we deny or break them

3. Conscience is to be subordinated to, and informed by, the revealed Word of God. — Conscience cannot be our final ethical authority because it is, unlike God’s revealed Word, changeable and fallible. Too often, though, Christians reverse the order and attempt to use their conscience in order to judge God and his Word. Some Christians claim, for example, “I could not worship a God who would say [a clear statement from the Bible]” or “I couldn’t believe in a God who would do [something the Bible claims God clearly told someone to do].” In making such statements they may be appealing to their conscience. But in such cases, their consciences are being informed by Satan—not by God.

A person’s conscience may cause them to question a particular interpretation of Scripture, but our conscience can never legitimately judge a holy God or his holy Word. When we find ourselves thinking “Did God really say?” when Scripture clearly says he did, then we know it is the serpent and not the Savior speaking (Genesis 3:1)

4. To willfully act against conscience is always a sin. — As theologian Sam Storms says, “The conscience of the Christian is obligated and bound only by what the Bible either commands or forbids, or by what may be legitimately deduced from an explicit biblical principle.”

Our conscience should always be informed by what God has said. But what if we are mistaken about what the Bible commands or forbids? What if, for example, I believe that the Bible forbids any form of dancing—and yet I go square dancing ever Saturday night. Is that a sin? In that case, it would be a sin for me to go square dancing since I would be choosing to act in a way in which I think is sinful.

To violate one’s conscience is indeed a sin. But what makes something a sin is not merely “being out of alignment with our values” but in choosing our own will over the will of God.

Imagine if I were at a neighbor's house and see a wallet lying on the floor. Thinking it's my neighbor's wallet I quickly take the cash from it. Later I realize that it wasn't my neighbor's wallet at all—it was my wallet, which had fallen out of my pocket. Would I still be guilty of theft, even though it was my own money I took? Yes, I would be since I had intended to do wrong. I had intended to steal – intended to violate God's commands—even though I was mistaken about the object of my theft.

As Paul says, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23)." Sproul expands on that verse by saying: "If we do something that we think is sin, even if we are misinformed, we are guilty of sin. We are guilty of doing something we believe to be wrong. We act against our consciences. That is a very important principle. [Martin] Luther was correct in saying, 'It is neither right nor safe to act against conscience.'"

Sproul adds that the "conscience can excuse when it ought to accusing, and it also can accuse when it should be excusing." While we should challenge misperceptions of what the Bible commands and forbids, we should be careful about encouraging people who are not yet mature in the faith or are underdeveloped in knowledge of Scripture from acting in ways that will violate their unformed or immature conscience.

5. Conscience can be suppressed by sin. — If we desire to develop a positive habit, we need to perform an action repeatedly, over time, until it becomes an automatic reflex. The same process occurs when we fall into sin. When we sin, we reject God's authority. If we repeat our sin, over time, the rejection of God's authority becomes an automatic reflex.

Even unbelievers, who innately know God's general revelation, such as his invisible attributes, the creation ordinances, and the Noahide Laws (the laws given to Noah, such as the prohibition against murder), begin to deny such knowledge because of sin. Paul says that by our unrighteousness we suppress the truth. They think they are wise, but their sin makes them foolish. Eventually, God gives them over to their debased minds (Romans 1:24).

Christians are also in danger of falling into this destructive pattern. Sometimes our sin leads us to doubt the very reality of God. When we deny God's authority, we begin to doubt his existence so that we can quiet what our conscience is trying to tell us about his judgment. (Not all doubt is caused by sin, but sin almost always leads to doubts.) Sin can cause our conscience to become "seared" and "corrupted" and wholly unreliable (1 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:15).

This is why to protect our conscience and keep it in working order we must preach the gospel to ourselves daily. We must call on the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin, lead us to righteousness, and remind us of the judgment that we are spared by our union with Christ Jesus. Only then can our conscience serve its intended purpose of helping us conform to the values of our Creator.

In the next article in this series, we'll begin comparing and contrasting other ethical systems—deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics—to the biblical standard.