

Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning – an excerpt ¹

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THE BASIS OF THE BIBLE'S ETHICAL STANDARDS IS THE MORAL CHARACTER OF GOD

1. God's Character Is Good. When the Bible talks about God's moral character, it talks about God as being "good." For example:

*You are good and do good;
teach me your statutes. (Ps. 119:68)*

*The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness, and without iniquity,
just and upright is he. (Deut. 32:4)*

*Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship you. (Rev. 15:3–4)*

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In these and many other passages, the Bible emphasizes that God's moral character is good. He is a God who is good, and also loving, just, merciful, faithful, truthful, and holy. In addition, God approves of and actually delights in his own moral character. He is the One who is the "blessed" God, that is, the One who is supremely happy in himself (1 Tim. 1:11; 6:15).² In fact, when his Word declares that he is "good," it implies that he considers his own character to be worthy of approval.

2. God Approves of Creatures Who Conform to His Moral Character.

Many other passages in Scripture show that God desires and approves of moral creatures who conform to his moral character. Just as God is loving, just, merciful, faithful, truthful, holy, and so forth, so he also desires that we act in ways that are loving, just, merciful, faithful, truthful, holy, and so forth. These are the qualities that God approves of in himself, and therefore these are the moral qualities that he approves of in his creatures as well. Just as he delights to contemplate his own moral excellence, he delights to see his moral excellence reflected in the creatures he has made.³

Here are some biblical passages showing that God delights to see his character reflected in our lives:

But as he who called you is holy, you also *be holy* in all your conduct.
(1 Pet. 1:15)

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:36)

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

Therefore *be imitators of God*, as beloved children. (Eph. 5:1)

² The word *blessed* in these verses translates the Greek adjective *makarios*, which means "blessed, happy" (BDAG, 610–611).

³ Once we accept the idea that God's own moral character is good, it is easier to answer the following question: "(1) Are God's moral standards right because he commands them or (2) does he command them because they are right?"

Both statements are true, if they are properly understood. (1) We must be careful not to imagine that God could command anything that is contrary to his moral character, and so we must not imagine that God could arbitrarily command anything we might imagine. If God's moral character is infinitely good, then he cannot command anything except what is right and good, and that means that anything he commands is right because he commands it. (2) We must be careful not to imagine that there is some higher standard of "good" or "right" outside of God to which he decides to conform. If we understand that the only absolute standard of good and right is God's own character, then we can also say that he commands things because they are right (they conform to his moral character).

You therefore must *be perfect*, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:48)

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge *after the image of its creator*. (Col. 3:9–10)

Paul's idea is that our "new self" is becoming more like God, and therefore we should imitate God's truthfulness.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears *we shall be like him*, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him *purifies himself as he is pure*. (1 John 3:2–3)

Putting this another way, we are to live in the same way that Jesus lived, to walk as he walked:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Cor. 11:1)

And *walk in love, as Christ loved us* and gave himself up for us. (Eph. 5:2)

Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:6)

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Pet. 2:21)

John Murray, professor of systematic theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia from 1930 to 1966, rightly observes:

In the last analysis, why must we behave in one way and not in another? . . . The ultimate standard of right is the character or nature of God. The basis of ethics is that God is what he is, and we must be conformed to what he is in holiness, righteousness, truth, goodness, and love. . . . God made man in his own image and after his likeness. Man must, therefore, be like God.⁴

⁴ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 177.

GOD COULD NOT HAVE MADE OTHER MORAL STANDARDS

Because the moral standards that God gives us are grounded in his moral character, he could not have made other moral standards for us than the ones that he made. He could not have commanded us that it was right to hate people rather than to love them, to lie rather than to tell the truth, to murder rather than to protect life, to be unjust rather than just, and so forth.

However, one word of clarification is important here. When I speak of God's moral standards, *I do not mean to include the temporary regulations* that God gave the people of Israel in the time of Moses, such as the regulations about clean and unclean foods or the requirements for various kinds of animal sacrifices. Rather, I am referring to the abiding moral standards that have been applicable to all people for all periods of history.

GOD'S ABIDING MORAL STANDARDS AS FOUND IN THE BIBLE APPLY TO ALL PEOPLE IN ALL CULTURES IN ALL PERIODS OF HISTORY

If God's moral standards flow from his unchanging moral character, then it follows that these are the moral standards by which God will hold all people everywhere accountable. Several passages indicate that God will one day be the Judge of the entire earth:

Shall not the *Judge of all the earth* do what is just? (Gen. 18:25)

He comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Ps. 96:13)

When Paul spoke to the pagan Greek philosophers on the Areopagus in Athens, he was speaking to an audience that had no knowledge of the moral standards of the God of Israel (even if some had a passing acquaintance with Jewish religion, Paul could not have assumed such knowledge on the part of any of his hearers). Even to this audience Paul proclaimed that the one true God, "the God who made the world and everything in it," is the God who "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 17:24, 31). These pagan Greek philosophers, Paul said, would be judged by God according to his eternal, universal moral standards.

Similarly, in Romans 1, Paul teaches that Gentiles (most of whom have no knowledge of God's written moral standards in the Jewish Bible) will be held accountable to God because they are "without excuse" when they do not honor God as God or give thanks to him (vv. 20–21). Paul says that such Gentile

sinner “know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die,” but they “not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (v. 32). Moreover, they “know” these standards because “the work of the law is written on their hearts” (2:15).

Of course, these statements do not mean that any unbeliever can live up to God’s moral standards and merit God’s approval for his or her life, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). These proclamations of accountability to God’s moral laws are given for the purpose of persuading people to repent of their sins and trust in Christ for forgiveness: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23).

Peter says something similar in speaking about hostile unbelievers who are mocking and slandering faithful Christians:

They are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; *but they will give account* to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Pet. 4:4–5)

The conclusion from these passages is that even people who do not believe in the God of the Bible or agree that his moral standards have divine authority on their lives will be judged by the God of all the earth. And the moral standards for which they will be held accountable are those that are found in God’s “law,” which is perfectly revealed in Scripture and also written on people’s hearts and consciences (though imperfectly perceived).