

An Ancient Book and a Post-Modern World

St Matt's Ethics Series, 2016

Christian Ethics

Ethics is concerned with right and wrong, good and evil. It especially focuses on our actions, what we do and how we do it, but may also consider character and the motives behind our actions. Everybody in the world behaves in light of an ethical framework, whether or not they can explain their framework, or if it is a consistent framework, or even if they always obey that framework. Despite the fact that we each have one, our ethical frameworks can be developed on the basis of a variety of different influences – what our parents do, what we are taught in school, how our friends behave, the laws of a nation, new trends in society – with the result that our individual ethical frameworks will be different in both minor and major ways.

Christian ethics should be based on the will of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture – the Bible is central for a Christian's ethical framework. At times, Christian ethics might be consistent with the views of our society, but at other times the two will clash, and the Christian who bases their ethics on the Bible will feel as though they are swimming against the cultural current. It's much easier to go with the cultural current, and then try and make the Bible fit into the values we'd prefer to hold, but if we want to live lives obedient to our creator, it is so important for us to constantly return to what the Bible actually teaches, to humbly wrestle with God's word to determine his will, and to support each other so that we can swim against the current when necessary.

That said, as anyone who has been a Christian for some time can confirm, it's not always easy to know how to apply the Bible to different situations. If only there was a chapter in Acts where the Apostles taught Christians how to love their neighbour in a globalized world in which we are increasingly connected to strangers... If only there was an unusually clear passage in Revelation on reproductive technologies and stem cell research... Alas, prayerfully seeking God's guidance, we must do the hard work: studying the Bible on its own terms, noting the context, genre, grammar, syntax, purpose (biblical exegesis); putting passages into their correct context in the history of God's salvation (biblical theology), and in light of this; connecting the dots between different passages to develop doctrines (systematic theology) that can be applied to our specific dilemmas.

The process is challenging and humbling. But by God's grace, again and again the development and application of Christian ethics has led to the improvement of our world in situations that aren't immediately and definitively addressed in scripture, from the outlawing of infanticide in the Roman Empire (AD 374) to the development of public education in Europe (sixteenth century on) and on and on.¹

With this encouragement in mind, in April 2016 at St Matt's we turn to Scripture to wrestle with ethical issues surrounding two topics that impact Christians and our world – business and war. It's important that we discuss ethical issues together in our church, firstly, because the issues themselves are significant, but secondly, because a Christian ethical framework should never be developed in isolation. We need to test our understanding of Scripture in consultation with others that have the Holy Spirit living in them, both in our local church, and within the global, historical Church.

1 W. Grudem, "Influencing Government for Good," christianunion.org, written October 2015, accessed April 2016.

An Interpretation Issue: Should the Old Testament Shape our Christian Ethics?

Many a Christian, upon reading one passage or other in the Old Testament, has asked, “does this actually relate to us today?” *Are* Christians supposed to obey Jewish dietary restrictions? *Should* we look at Israel's invasion of Canaan in Joshua as we develop an ethical framework for war in the 21st century? At its heart, the question we are asking is this: *Do the teachings of the Old Testament still apply?*

The church has been divided on this question. Some covenant theologians might say that *every* command in the Old Testament is directly applicable for Christians unless it is *repealed* by the New Testament. At the other end of the spectrum, some dispensationalist theologians might say that *nothing* in the Old Testament is directly applicable for Christians unless it is *reaffirmed* by the New Testament.

There are problems with both extremes, and a more accurate answer is a little more complex. In brief, there is always a timeless principle in an Old Testament passage that can be discovered and applied for the Christian life. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “*All Scripture* is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every *good work*.” However, that timeless principle isn't always the exact command as it appears in the Old Testament. We sometimes need to dig a little to understand the purpose behind the command.

Having worked out the purpose/principle behind the command, we need to understand how Jesus fulfills it, before trying to apply it to ourselves. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus declares, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

An example helps: in Leviticus 19:19, the people of Israel are commanded: “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.” So, what's the *original purpose* for this command? In the immediate context of verse 19, we see a preoccupation with not intermingling different things, which would give up their distinctness. In the broader context of the chapter, in Leviticus 19:2, God says, “Be holy [righteous and distinct], because I the LORD your God am holy.” From the context, we see that the *purpose* of the commands in Leviticus 19 have to do with the people of Israel demonstrating their righteousness and distinctness from the surrounding nations. The principle behind the command in verse 19 is ultimately about being distinct. *Jesus fulfills* the command to be holy by sinlessly dying on the cross for each of us, and giving us his righteousness and making us holy (distinct) when we put our faith in him. So the *timeless truth*, to “be holy”, is achieved by Christians today by putting our faith in Jesus, demonstrated by lives that obey him, instead of living like the non-Christians around us.

In sum, *yes*, the Old Testament should shape our Christian ethics! But we should work hard to understand all scripture in light of the gospel, to see exactly how we should be applying it today.

Preaching series and dates in 2016

Sermon Title	Preaching Passages	Date
The Bible and Business	Leviticus 19:1,9-18,32-37 Colossians 3:22-4:1	17 April
The Bible and the Battlefield	Isaiah 9:1-7 Romans 12:17-13:5	24 April

The Bible and Business

1. Do Christians need to be ethical?
2. How does the business world affect you personally?
3. Can you suggest any ethical dilemmas for businesses or people in the workplace?

Given the variety and complexity of ethical issues that relate to business and the workplace, we need an ethical framework based on principles that can be applied (with much prayer and thought) in different circumstances. We will investigate different passages in Scripture to develop these principles.

Read Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, 32-37 (or all Lev 19 if you have extra time)

4. Based on broader biblical knowledge, what is the historical context of this passage?

d) Of all the commands in the chapter, which do you think is the most important for business ethics?

7. Verses 9-10 refer to a practice that most of us don't engage in today. Looking beyond the specific situation to the general purpose of the command, can you suggest a timeless principle these verses teach about making money?

8. How might obedience to verse 18 impact a) the type of work we do, and b) how we do it?

9. a) Imagine you work for a small start-up company that wants to be distinctly Christian, and are asked to establish some ethical principles for the company to operate under. How would you summarize the directions of Leviticus 19?

b) Do you think the ethical standards should change if the company was non-Christian?

10. Divide into three groups.

Group 1: read Colossians 3:22-4:1,

Group 2: read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14,

Group 3: read 1 Tim 6:6-10, 17-19.

Based on these passages, would you add any additional ethical principles for situation a) or situation b) in question 9?

11. Having read several passages of Scripture, and from your own Bible knowledge, is it ethically wrong for a Christian to seek to make profit in business? Under what circumstances might the pursuit of profit become wrong?

Ethical Dilemmas

Based on your study and discussion to this point, consider together one or more of the following ethical dilemma scenarios. (Alternatively, group members could propose different ethical dilemmas that relate to business.)

A. In an effort to shed expenses in 2009, Pacific Brands cut 1850 jobs in Australia when it outsourced much of its manufacturing and administrative work to Asia. They were widely criticized for this, despite being one of many companies to do it. Would you say such a cost cutting activity is ethical or unethical? Why?

B. You are buying chocolate. One chocolate company sells their blocks at a cheaper price than competitors by sourcing their cocoa from a country that does not have minimum wage laws. Is buying this chocolate ethical or unethical? Why?

C. Might you be ethically responsible for how the money in your superannuation fund is invested?

D. You are the CEO of a large company, and your staff have prepared a proposal for a new project offering your services to a government agency in a foreign country. If your bid is successful, it will achieve job stability for your employees in Australia, while also creating new jobs for people in the foreign country. After your proposal, you are told that a cash “pledge” must be given to certain government officials in order for your proposal to be considered. You realize this “pledge” is actually a bribe, something you know is common practice in this country. Is it ethically permissible to offer this “pledge?”²

For further reading on Christian business ethics, see S. Rae and K. Wong (eds), Beyond Integrity: A Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2004.

² Scenario taken from, W. Gill, 'An Introduction to Ethical Reasoning,' in S. Rae and K. Wong (eds), Beyond Integrity: A Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2004.

The Bible and the Battlefield

1. What is the closest interaction you have had with war and its effects?

Read Isaiah 9:1-7

2. a) Based on your biblical knowledge, what is the historical context of this passage?

b) What is the purpose of this passage?

c) How does Jesus fulfill the promises of this passage?

Historically, Christians have had a variety of approaches in regards to militarism and war:

- 1. Crusade or holy war (conducted out of religious zeal). National interest war (where patriotism trumps other ethical concerns).*
- 2. Just war (elaborated on below)*
- 3. Non-resistance (participation in military conflict as a non-combatant (e.g. ambulance, chaplaincy)*
- 4. Pacifism (nonviolence based on the general principle that all war is wrong and should not be supported by a Christian).³*

The great Christian thinker, Augustine, in AD 410, gave the first clear articulation of “Just War,” that under certain conditions it was appropriate to wage war. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas fleshed out this theory, suggesting three qualities were necessary for a just war: 1) the war must be declared by legitimate authorities and not private individuals, 2) a just cause is required – those being attacked should deserve it based on a fault they have committed, 3) the wagers of just war must have a rightful intention, such as the advancement of a good or the avoidance of an evil.⁴

9. Based on the passages we have looked at and your own biblical knowledge, which of these approaches do you think is the most valid?

³ <http://togethermagazine.com.au/2014/11/20/christian-approaches-to-war/>, accessed April, 2016.

⁴ J. Davis, *Evangelical Ethics* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing), 2004, page 247.

10. a) Under what circumstances (if any) would you approve of Australia going to war?

b) Under what circumstances – and how – do you think a Christian should participate in war?

Discuss the following quotes, asking what they mean, and what you agree and disagree with:

A. “It is a terrible thing to take human life. The conflict between man and man and nation and nation is tragic. If there are men who declare that, no matter what the consequences, they cannot bring themselves to participate in this slaughter, the Church ought to be able to say to the general community: We quite understand this scruple and we respect it. It proceeds from the conviction that the true end of man is brotherhood, and that love is the law of life.

We who allow ourselves to become engaged in war need this testimony of the absolutist against us, lest we accept the warfare of the world as normative, lest we become callous to the horror of war, and lest we forget the ambiguity of our own actions and motives and the risk we run of achieving no permanent good from this momentary anarchy in which we are involved.”

– *Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, 1948.*

B. “The Church must not preach pacifism, but it must see to it... that the many ways of avoiding war which now exist in practice should be honestly applied until they are all exhausted. It is better in this respect that the Church should stick to its post too long and become a forlorn hope than that it should leave it too soon and then have to realise that it has become unfaithful by yielding to the general excitement, and that it is thus the accessory to an avoidable war which can only be described as mass murder.”

– *Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics Vol III: The Doctrine of Creation, 1961.*

C. “Jesus chose as his weapon not a sword but a cross. He fulfilled his God-given mission not through war against the Romans, nor through violent overthrow of religious opponents, but through pacifist teaching, nonviolence and martyrdom.”

– *Rod Benson, Public Address, 12 March 2009.*

– Rod Benson, “Christian Approaches to War”, 2014.