

Introduction to Christian Ethics

By Dr. Margaret Olubiyi, DBS

This course introduces the student to the branch of Christian Theology that defines right and wrong behavior from a biblical perspective. It is an in-depth study of the moral principles required by God of His children in their homes, workplaces, local church assemblies, and the communities they live in. At the completion of this course, the student will understand the general concept of the field of ethics, Christian ethics, and how to develop a method by which they can deal with the moral and social issues that they will have to face in society as they interact with others.

Prerequisite: None

Definition of Ethics

Ethics is derived from the ancient Greek word *ethikos* meaning "relating to one's character. Some mistakenly use the terms "ethics" and "morals" interchangeably, but they are not the same. The term "morals" comes from the Latin meaning "custom" or "habit." Morals are what people do. While the word "ethics" term originated from the root word *ethos* meaning "character, moral nature." According to Merriam Webster dictionary, ethics refers to the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation. It is the principles of conduct governing an individual or group. In summary, ethics as a discipline is a systematic study concerned with the moral evaluation of human behavior.

Principles of Ethics

Across several fields or disciplines, it is standard practice to have a set of ethics governing the employees' decision processes and behaviors in an organization.

However, in general, there are four principles of ethics widely accepted across disciplines in the United States and globally. They are:

1. Respect
2. Beneficence
3. Nonmaleficence
4. Justice

1. Respect: We should respect other persons' autonomy, which is to recognize the decisions made by other people concerning their own lives. This act is also called the principle of human dignity. We are not to interfere in the decision making of adults who are competent to make their own decisions.

2. Beneficence – This means taking the necessary steps to prevent harm. While still respecting others, individuals must make an effort to secure the well-being of others.

Two standard rules have been conveyed as complementary expressions of beneficent actions in this sense: (1) do not harm, and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize potential harms. However, in complex cases, adopting this principle often puts us in direct conflict with respecting other people's autonomy.

3. Nonmaleficence - We have an obligation not to harm others: "First, do no harm." You will see this often apply mostly to practitioners or professionals in the medical or behavioral health field. Never encourage the participation of individuals in interventions or sessions that could result in harm to the individual. Where harm cannot be avoided, we are obligated to minimize the damage we do. Where possible, strive to reduce the risk of harm to others.

4. Justice - Everyone should be treated fairly and equally. As individuals, we must provide others with whatever they are owed or deserved. In public life, we have an

obligation to treat all people equally, fairly, and impartially. Justice equals fairness, equal distribution of services, equal rights, and access to services, no discrimination. Injustice occurs when some benefit to which a person is entitled, is denied without good reason or when some burden is imposed unduly.

Formal Approaches to Ethics

Ethical Constructs

Teleology

The study of evidence of design in nature. It is a fact attributed to nature or natural processes of being directed toward an end or shaped by a purpose. (derived from Greek words telos, (end or goal) and logos (reason)).

Some ethicists state that the appropriate approach to making ethical decisions is to begin by determining the highest or greatest good in life. If we take this approach, we start by looking for the one thing we would be willing to give up for everything else. The teleological approach to ethics is concerned with how the choices we make will affect a particular desired moral outcome.

An example of teleological ethics, a thinker of this theory, might consider stealing to be okay if the goal or outcome is to feed one's family or feed the homeless, which is good, so the action is right.

Deontology

The study of the nature of duty and obligation (derived from the Greek words for deon (duty) and logos (reason)).

With this approach, some put duty first above value. Duty has to do with an obligation based on a relationship. When an individual acts from a place of duty, it is not to attain an objective, but they come from a place of commitment. e.g., a soldier's duty to serve and protect his or her country. Satisfaction comes from doing one's duty. The

deontological approach suggests that actions are good or bad, according to a clear set of rules. An example of a deontological approach to ethics is the belief that killing is wrong, even if it's in self-defense. Deontology states that an act that is not good morally can lead to something good, such as a man who shoots an intruder to protect his family. So even though killing is wrong, protecting his family is morally right. (the outcome is good).

Christian Ethics

What is Christian Ethics?

It is the comprehensive and systematic evaluation of human conduct from a Christian perspective or worldview. God's revelation in scripture guides Christian ethics. It is defined by the Christian faith that characterizes and outlines who believers are, their behavior, and moral stance on societal issues.

The Christian Ethicist approaches ethics from the framework of the Christian faith and draws his or her conclusions from it. Christian ethics asks the following questions:

- ❖ Should women have careers or jobs outside the home?
- ❖ Should a believer/Christian approve of abortion regardless of the circumstances?
- ❖ Should divorce be accepted/ Should divorcees remarry?
- ❖ Should an unmarried couple with children live together (common law situation)?

Christian ethics ask crucial questions. It wants to help us understand what the Bible teaches concerning what behaviors and acts are approved by God and which ones are not. The Bible may not cover every life issue or situation one may face in life, such as a person struggling with drug addiction (i.e., heroin). Nevertheless, we know what

Scripture does say about defiling our bodies, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 6:19. If you also look at Colossians 3:1-6, it clearly reveals the type of lifestyle we are called to live as believers. This scripture text summarizes Christian ethics.

Why Study Christian Ethics?

- ❖ Because we are ambassadors of Jesus Christ, whose teachings are centered on both theology, ethics, and morals.
- ❖ Because all people make moral and ethical decisions every day.
- ❖ Because ethics provides the standard by which believers can measure their spiritual growth and development.
- ❖ Because it teaches us how to live a life that is pleasing to God; how to know God's will.
- ❖ Because it helps guide us into understanding through Scripture what behavior is acceptable and what is not.

Principles of Christian Ethics

Let us look at the basic principles of ethics from a Christian perspective.

Christian ethics is faith that translated into actions. It is living according to biblical principles, not just knowing them. (faith backed up by actions). The principles of Christian ethics are standards that believers (followers of Jesus Christ) should follow and adhere to. Our ethics must emulate that of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

1. Whatever we do, our motives must be pure, just, and done in the name of Jesus. "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him." [Col. 3:17]
2. Our actions must not be selfish, but instead must be acted out of love. (be altruistic). "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble" 1 Peter 3:8, Also see 1 Corinthians 10:24.
3. Our actions must be done in faith. "But without faith, it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." [Heb. 11:6]. Christian must believe in God and in His revelation for all mankind.
4. We are to seek righteousness/holiness always. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto "[Mat. 6:33]

5. We are to always be of service to others. Christians are called to serve and do it unto the Lord; faithfully.
6. We are to be courageous- Amid trials and persecution, believers must be bold and courageous and rely on the Lord to see them through. "Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may [b]prosper wherever you go." [Joshua. 1:7]

Alternatives to Christian Ethics: Religious Systems

Recent statistics show that there exist over 4,000 religions globally. However, the eighteen listed below are listed as the world's major religions.

- Atheism/Agnosticism
- African Diaspora Religions
- Baha'i
- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Confucianism
- Druze
- Gnosticism
- Hinduism
- Indigenous American Religions
- Islam
- Jainism
- Judaism
- Rastafarianism
- Shinto
- Sikhism
- Traditional African Religions

- Zoroastrianism

According to a Pew Research Center demographic analysis done in 2017, Christians remain the largest religious group in the world in 2015, making up nearly a third of the earth's 7.3 billion people. It is followed by the Muslims (Islam) with 1.8 billion people (24%) of the world's population, with Hindus and Buddhists following closely behind.

Diverse Ethical Views

Like Christianity, all these other religious systems also have their positions on ethical issues. They all have their own distinct approaches to ethics and moral standards.

Let us look at three of the other popular religious systems and their stance on ethics.

1. **Judaism** - The Jewish faith's ethical code is based on the authority of the Creator, the Theistic God. He created humankind and has instructed how His people should behave. According to the organization of Israel & Judaism Studies, Judaism may be described as "ethical monotheism," a religion based on a concept that there is a single incorporeal God who gives commandments that constitute a moral law for all humanity. The divine moral laws are embodied in the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah. It provides instruction and rules on justice (Tzedek in Hebrew), equality before the law, social welfare, freedom (touches on enslavement, and how to treat foreigners in their midst). Do not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, for once you were strangers in the land of Egypt." [Exodus 23.9]
2. **Islam** - The ethics of Muslims are based on the Koran, their holy book. The emphasis of Islamic ethics is conformity to the law. Religion covers every aspect of the Muslim's life -- their morality, both individual and social, economic issues, racial and ethnic inequality, almsgiving. According to the Koran teachings, whatever leads to the welfare of the individual is morally right, and whatever is harmful or detrimental is ethically wrong.

3. **Hinduism** – There are about four philosophical concepts fundamental to the Hindu's ethical view and thought. They are: the reincarnation of souls (transmigrated into another life form such as a dog, horse, plant,.), the law of karma (teaches that the soul's past deeds determined our present situation and that our current actions determine our future circumstances), the divine is not separated from the human, but rather is within our very being and lastly. They believe a person's "karma" determines what life form his next incarnation would take. Finally, the soul's ultimate destiny is freedom from the journey of the soul from one entity to another and absorption into the divine.

Sir Richard Burn, an English civil servant in British India, historian of India and numismatist writes of Hindu ethics:

"He knows that it is wrong to commit murder, adultery, theft, and perjury, and to covert and he honors his parents, in the case of the father at any rate, to a degree exceeding the customs of most nations, which have no ceremony resembling that of the Śrāddha."

Alternatives Within Christian Ethics

Within Christianity, you will find different viewpoints and a stance on morals and ethical standards. Unfortunately, it occurs as a result of the numerous denominations or groups within the Christian faith. The different approaches frequently cause a lack of unanimity to moral issues. Regardless of what denomination, the Christian belongs to, the fundamental thing to remember is that every action and decision taken must be approached from a biblical perspective (from God's word concerning how we must live and act in society).

Catholicism

- Gone through transition and has several contemporary ethical systems.

- Pre-Vatican II (1962-1965) Ethics based upon three sources of ethical principles.
- Pre-Vatican II Council (1962-1965)
- Post-Vatican II (1965): Changes in Catholic moral theology and ethics.
- Post-Vatican II (2000's) Defense for Older Traditions

Pre-Vatican II (1962-1965)

- Natural Law: observable through general revelation and discernible through human reason, yet unchangeable since it originates with God.
- Divine Law: recorded in Scripture and also unchangeable as the Word of God.
- Ecclesiastical Law: Law and ethics as decided by the Catholic Church fathers and papal authority.

Pre-Vatican II council (1962-1965)

- Morality was seen as objective
- The believer was called to discover what is ethically right - not decide morals based upon the human perspective.

Post-Vatican II (1965): Changes in Catholic moral theology and ethics

- Greater importance on scriptural authority for morals and ethics vs. ecclesiastical authority.
- Greater focus on individual conscience in decision-making and the church becoming a religious education source - instead of church dictation of absolutes.
- Moral and ethical decisions shift from ethical absolutes to "do as much good as possible and as little evil as necessary."
- From 1965 until the present day, some catholic theologians continue to insist on the obedience of magisterium (pope, cardinals, bishops in council, and the popes' writings on ethics and social norms. This approach has become more pronounced under Benedict XVI). Pope Francis is working to change this perspective.

Greek Orthodox Ethics Principles:

- Orthodoxy supports tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, yet insists that only those who are Orthodox will be saved.
- Doctrine supports the health of both body and soul.

- Considers human life as sacred.
- Upholds ethics that support human dignity.
- Based upon the Bible and the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox church fathers and bishops.

Protestant Ethics: two predominant ethical perspectives

Fundamentalist Protestantism

Evangelical Protestantism

Fundamental Protestantism: ethics assume that:

- The Bible is infallible and the final authority in moral, ethical, personal, and social ethics and practice. It is the basis of "biblical ethics."
- It rejects the ceremonial law - sees it applicable only to Israel, including the ten commandments - as fulfilled in Christ, except those moral laws still relevant in the NT.
- Tries to find a "literal" biblical answer to each modern dilemma or ethical problem.

Evangelical Protestantism: ethics assume that:

- Morality is a universal concern, and that all people are held to divinely given morals even though they do not believe in God.
- The Bible is seen as authoritative, and it needs interpretation.
- The Decalogue or ten commandments summarize universal moral duty and what everyone ought to live them as the "abiding laws" -- ethical decision-making tools.
- Justice is emphasized as respecting the rights of others.
- Love is emphasized as caring about or doing what needs "to be or do" as a community member or society.

Taken from: <https://quizlet.com/55420814/christian-ethics-alternative-ethical-systems-within-christianity-flash-cards/>

Examples of Societal Issues In The World Today

Throughout history, Christians have been confronted with moral issues and appropriately address these issues as believers. Some have made decisions and taken actions based on biblical standards of what is right and wrong, and others have not. As Christians, there is only way we must adhere to and is the way of the Lord God. Jesus

Christ is the perfect model to emulate when it comes to adhering to Christian ethics. While on earth in, He did what was just, what was right in the eyes of God and continues to advocate for us today at the right hand of God, the Father.

In today's society, some of the issues we face include:

- ❖ Racial Injustice, Prejudice and Discrimination
- ❖ Equal rights for men and women
- ❖ Biomedical Issues such as Organ transplants, Cloning
- ❖ Abortion
- ❖ Christian Interpretation of Sexuality
- ❖ Homosexuality (LGBTQ) lifestyles
- ❖ Capital Punishment
- ❖ Immigration
- ❖ Capitalism

The study of Christian Ethics is extensive, and this introductory course is just to give the student and reader an understanding of what ethics from a biblical perspective looks like. It enables the bible student to examine himself or herself, identifying areas life where he or she may have improperly handled a case or situation.

As a bible student and believer, it is important to conduct a reassessment of how you may handle specific societal issues in your community or a global problem that you have taken an interest in based on what you have studied in this course and what God is saying in His Word. The most important thing to remember as you live, work, serving in your communities is that your actions (every decision and choice you make) will determine your level of commitment and relationship with the Lord. The ethics of a believer must be centered on the Lord Jesus Christ's teachings and the entire Word of God. It is by doing so that the Lord, through His Holy Spirit, will empower you with the tools, gifts, skills, wisdom, and even life experiences needed to handle every situation appropriately.

Please go to download test questions on website to access the tests and final exam of course.

<https://www.swordofthespiritbibletraining.org/Download-Test-Questions.php>

SOTS STUDENTS ONLY - DO NOT COPY WITHOUT PERMISSION