

Deity Defines Goodness (Ethics)

By Nate Wilson



To frame this section on ethics, let me present a picture of my toddler in the kitchen. Imagine that toddler being left to do whatever she wanted: Eat cookies all day long, randomly turn on stove burners, run water and splash it on the floor - whatever she wants. Will that make her a happy person in the long run? No. She does not have enough knowledge to determine what is best for her; she will naturally choose junk food that will make her sick; she will naturally choose to make messes, leading to unsanitary conditions and disease. It is not good to let a child do whatever she wants; God gives parents to children to teach children how to submit to a higher standard outside of themselves.

Why ethics now?

What standard should we follow? Why not make up our own? That's what this chapter is about. But we had to cover epistemology and ontology in the previous chapters in order to get to this point.

So far I have come epistemologically to the Bible as the source of truth, then I have opened the Bible to the first book (Genesis) to see ontologically that God is the source of everything that exists. Now I plan to move into the second chapter of Genesis and into the second book of the Bible (Exodus) to study ethics and show that God is the one who decides what is right and what is wrong.

We also see a parallel to this progression in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6):

- "Hallowed be Thy name..." What is the ultimate source of truth? The person who carries the "name" of God, so we first ask for that name and all that is associated with the person of God to be honored.
- Then what should come into being in this world? The kingdom of God. So let that be the focus of what we want to see come into being, "Let Your kingdom come."
- Then what should be done in this world? The "will" of God. So we ask for God's will to be done next. It is God's prerogative to decide what should and shouldn't be done. Ethics is the third function of deity.

We also see these three issues bundled together in Jesus' statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life..." (John 14:6) We've already surveyed "the truth" and "the life;" now let us look at "the way" – the good and right path, which has to do with ethics.

How do we get ethics?¹

Ethics is inherently personal. At the root of ethics and morality is a god of some sort who likes certain things and dislikes other things and defines good and evil based on a personal nature. That is why worldviews that claim the universe to be the result of impersonal matter and energy suddenly switch away from that impersonal matter and energy when it comes to defining right and wrong and define it personally in terms of their own preferences or in terms of some sort of group consensus among people. Biblical Christianity, on the other hand, places the prerogative for deciding what is right and what is wrong in the hands of Jesus, the personal God of the Bible. It is a function of deity – the god of any given system gets to decide what is right and what is wrong.

According to Biblical Christianity, God's nature defines right and wrong. Whatever God likes is good and therefore right to do, and whatever God doesn't like is bad and therefore wrong to do. In his textbook on Biblical Ethics, Robertson McQuilken wrote that "moral law [is] God's expressed will concerning what constitutes likeness to God." McQuilken adds that the basis for ethics is God's demand, "Be holy as I am holy" (Lev. 19:2, 1 Pet. 1:16). Law is the expressed will of God that people be like Him morally.²

What's more, God not only has the right to decide what is right and what is wrong, He also has the right to hold everyone under Him accountable to His standard of ethics. The wise old preacher in the Bible saw this and wrote, "This is the end of the matter; all has been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man, for God will bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:13-14).

So it is the privilege of God to be "both Law-giver and Judge," as James 4:12 says. By contrast, the Apostle James asks, "Who are you that judges your neighbor?" In other words, if you're not God, then you can't judge anybody using your opinions of right and wrong. Jehovah-God, on the other hand, has been very proactive in speaking His law-will into the culture of His people, especially every time there was a new beginning in history. He has done so because it is His right as creator and God.

In the beginning, God told Adam what to do and what not to do:

- "Be fruitful and multiply and take dominion" (Gen. 1:28),
- "Eat from the trees of the garden (Gen 2:16), but do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:17).

Right from the start, Adam had a list of laws given by Jehovah-God to follow.

After God wiped out the world with a flood, Noah and his family stepped off the ark, and God started giving commands again: (Gen. 9:3-7)

- "You may eat the animals now,
- but don't kill other humans,
- Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth!"

¹ Some of the ideas in this chapter come from Prof. James D. Johnson's Ethics class at Sangre de Cristo Seminary.

² *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, p. 32.

What about the Israelite nation as they emerged from Egypt as a new nation? It wasn't long before God was giving commandments and explaining their application to all of life. Here's a summary of the ten commandments He gave through Moses in Exodus 20:

- God cannot tolerate competition – no other gods, no worshipping idols, and no careless use of His name. He is uniquely God.
- Honor the 7th day to keep it holy. God rested on the seventh day, so it is right to do what He did.
- Honor your parents – Jesus the Son honored His Father, and we should be like Him.
- Do not murder – don't even hate others and wish that they would die unjustly.
- Do not commit adultery – God is faithful, so you should be faithful also.
- Do not lie – God is truthful, so we should be too.
- Do not steal, and don't even wish in your heart to have something which belongs to someone else. God doesn't do such things, so we shouldn't either.

Revivals under Josiah (2 Kings 22:8ff) and Nehemiah (ch. 8) involved the re-discovery and reading out loud of the law, which was to be read anyway every seven years to all the people (Deut. 31:10). The recognition that God is the one at whom the buck stops on ethics, has been at the heart of every revival.

Jesus also came, giving authoritative commands:

- He summarized the greatest commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and... love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37ff).
- Then He said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).
- In John 15, He added, “This is my command: ... Abide in me... Love one another... Bear much fruit.”
- Finally, He gave the Great Commission: “...Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you...” (Matt. 28:18ff)
- He also promised to come back to separate those who are blessed from those who are cursed based on their obedience to His commands (Matt. 25:31ff).

Wait a minute! Isn't Morality a private matter?

“It is not possible to judge another's truth.” ~Shirley MacLaine³

Many Americans think that ethics is a private matter, something which can be kept to oneself. That's because they believe that morality comes from deep inside themselves. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say to me, “Hey, what's good for you is good for you, but I could never be like that!” This statement begs the question and assumes that each person has the right to be god and decide what is right and wrong for themselves. How did they get a right to that function of deity?

The problem with making morality a private matter is that all these autonomous little “gods” start bumping up against each other and offending each other. For instance, you get terrorists who believe that it is good to bring a gun into a classroom and kill the children in it. Ravi Zacharias, in his book, *Light In The Shadow Of Jihad*, counters the myth that morality is a private matter, saying, “demagogues such as Osama bin Laden believe that morality is a totally public matter, interwoven with religion, and that their followers are doing the world a favor by ridding it of any culture that privatizes religion and morality.”⁴

³ Noebel, *Understanding the Times*, p.109

⁴ Zacharias, *Light In The Shadow Of Jihad*, pp. 18-20

If you believe that everyone can decide for himself what is right and wrong, you are going to have to regularly put up with these terrorists, because you have no basis to declare them wrong or to put a stop to their murderous behavior. If you believe they shouldn't do certain things, what gives you the moral authority to decide what other people should or shouldn't do? Zacharias also comments, "The relativist who argues for the absence of absolutes smuggles absolutes into his arguments all the time... Hidden somewhere in the words of everyone who argues for complete relativism is a belief [an intuitive certainty] that there are, indeed, some acts that are wrong... It is true, by the way, that in the past century more people were killed under the banner of irreligion than by religious fanatics."⁵ Zacharias should know; he is from India where every month, it seems, we hear reports of Hindus killing more Christians.

Morality is not a private matter. Even though it starts in the heart, it necessarily flows into outward actions and becomes public. (More on this later.)

When Humans make the Rules

What is the result of following your own personal likes and dislikes to define right and wrong? (You get the same result, by the way, if you let another human define what is right and wrong for you.)

I went to a Chamber of Commerce luncheon in our town last year to hear a speaker on business ethics. If I recall correctly, he was a Presbyterian pastor, so I was curious to hear what he would say. He said that since nobody is going to agree on a religious text to determine everybody's morality, we must pick things that everybody agrees on. He argued that people are basically good, and that we can all agree on the basics. His human-consensus approach to ethics floored me. What a departure from the original Scottish Presbyterians who believed that man is fallen and unable to arrive at good without God, the Presbyterians who penned God's word to the kings of Scotland and England to hold them accountable to God's law, and who took up arms to defend themselves against those kings who flagrantly violated God's law. Too many churches today have lost their historic moorings and are looking to human opinions to define ethics.

Utilitarianism is another way to arrive at ethics without appealing beyond humans to a supernatural source. John Stuart Mills promoted this concept in the 19th Century: "Whatever does the most good for the most people is therefore good." Here's an example of Utilitarianism in action: Say you enter the hospital with a broken bone, but with functioning kidneys, functioning eyes, and a functioning heart. In that same hospital there are three other patients: One needs a heart transplant in order to live, one needs a kidney transplant in order to live, and one needs a corneal transplant in order to keep from going blind. What does Utilitarianism tell us to do? Don't waste resources on your broken bone, instead, give up your life and use your body parts for the good of the three other patients. That's what would do the most good for the most people. It's admittedly an extreme example, but I'm not sure I can trust other people to decide for me what does the most good for the most people.

If, however, you accept human sovereignty in deciding what is right and what is wrong, there is no objective standard outside of ourselves to determine right from wrong. The French Marquis DeSade was famous for taking this doctrine of humanism to its logical conclusion. "If nature is the absolute, cruelty equals non-cruelty."⁶ There would be no moral difference between stopping your car to let an elderly woman cross the road in front of you, or running her over in order to get to your destination quickly without having to wait for her.

⁵ *ibid.* pp. 20, 101.

⁶ Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* Episode 7, The Age of Non-Reason.

Another way men apart from God have conceived of ethics is through the paradigm of Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest." Robert Heinlein, the father of modern science fiction, explained in his book, *Starship Troopers*, that morality is the extension of the survival instinct for the whole human race. Whatever helps the human race succeed is therefore good. This is the kind of thinking that leads to intentionally taking the life of sick and elderly people, because the weak members of the human race have less fitness and therefore don't contribute well to survival, according to Darwin's theory.

Is it extreme to state that ethics based upon survival of the fittest leads to killing off weak people? No. Nine percent of the people in the Netherlands who died in 1990, died by euthanasia, and half of those killed by euthanasia were put to death without even gaining their permission.⁷ As of this writing, Euthanasia has been legalized in three U.S. states. Killing off all but the fittest is a logical outworking of ethics apart from the God of the Bible. In fact, Friedrich von Bernhardt, in his book, *Germany and the Next War*, went so far as to suggest that killing people off one-by-one isn't enough; wars should be manufactured to kill off large segments of undesirable people. He wrote, "War is a biological necessity; it is as necessary as the struggle of the elements of Nature; it gives a biologically just decision, since its decisions rest on the very nature of things."⁸ The Darwinian ethic creates a deathly society.

Many of the great wars of modern history have also been influenced by the philosophy and ethics of Karl Marx. David Nobel, in his book, *Understanding the Times*, summarizes Marxist theory thus:

"According to the Marxist dialectic, everything in the universe, including society, is in a state of flux or constant change. This change in society is a move upward toward the elimination of all social and economic class distinctions. The next social advance in history will be the move from capitalism to socialism. This will inevitably result in a change in society's ideas about morals... Nikita Khrushchev state[d], 'So as long as classes exist on the earth, there will be no such thing in life as something good in the absolute sense.' ...[Also in Marxist philosophy] the end justifies the means. Regardless of what you do, it is moral if it brings the world closer to eradicating social classes."⁹

Using man as the measure for ethics will necessarily result in a constantly-changing standard of right and wrong. Notice what one spokesman for Planned Parenthood said about technology making the seventh commandment obsolete:

"Historically, a primary reason for the enormous importance given to [marital] faithfulness and unfaithfulness was the lack of reliable birth-control techniques. Now that those techniques, including abortion, are generally available, this importance [of a law against adultery] has more and more diminished."¹⁰

Human law will change. This is also evident in the rather nebulous concept of impersonal, evolving Natural Law that John Locke promoted. He stated that, "The discovery of the natural law is a continuously unfolding enterprise."¹¹ Do you want to live in a society where right and wrong are constantly changing?

⁷ <http://www.pregnantpause.org/numbers/netheuth.htm>

⁸ Nobel, *Understanding the Times*, p.94

⁹ Nobel, *Understanding the Times*, pp. 99, 102-103

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.96

¹¹ www.radicalacademy.com/philnaturallaw.htm

Without God's absolute standard of truth, there is no reason to tell the truth in a business contract or in a court of justice unless you think it will benefit the people you want to benefit. One secular humanist, Max Hocutt, wrote, "The non-existence of God... means that there is no absolute morality, that moralities are sets of social conventions devised by humans to satisfy their need."¹² What is the logical conclusion of this? Paul Kurtz, editor of the original *Humanist Manifesto* admitted, "We may end up with [a man] concerned with his own personal lust for pleasure, ambition, and power, and impervious to moral constraints."¹³ Well, Dr. Kurtz, I think we've arrived!

Let's look at two more practical examples of what happens when man is the measure of right and wrong: First let's look at the legalization of abortion. Christian philosopher Gordon Clark made these remarks at a pro-life demonstration in front of Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga, TN, and I think it bears repeating at length:

"If Atheism is to be the law of the land, there can be no laws at all to support morality, for there is no morality apart from the laws of God. I would like to make it clear that sociology, statistics, psychology, or any empirical science can never determine moral norms. Secular science at best can discover what people do, but it cannot discover what people ought to do... [S]ocial consensus cannot determine what is right or wrong. The social consensus of the Spartans in antiquity and of at least some Indian tribes in North America condoned theft and even praised it. Before the Belgians took over the Congo a century or so ago, social consensus approved of cannibalism. The fact that various societies have considered theft and cannibalism to be right does not prove that theft and cannibalism are right – nor the murder of babies, either... One can perhaps with relative ease discover what groups of people think is right, but social consensus does not make anything right or wrong. So far as I can see, the only pertinent difference between the abortionists here and the cannibals in the Congo is that the abortionists do not eat the babies... What a waste of good meat in these times of famine. Of course the meat would have to be inspected by the USDA, but I can see no reason why, on abortionist principles – or lack of principles – for prohibiting the eating of human flesh... Of course babies are a little small, like Cornish hens. But if the Supreme Court can legalize the murder of infants, it can as easily legalize the murder of adults... The Supreme Court could [even] legalize the murder of all who support the right of life and thus produce a unanimous social consensus. If anyone thinks that this proposal is extreme, be it noted that Hitler's National Socialism and Stalin's international Socialism attempted just that."¹⁴

Secular Humanist worldviews, as the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer observed, necessarily tend towards the use of coercion to eliminate competing worldviews.¹⁵ The Nazis, acting as their own moral authority, legalized the murder of all Jews, then intimidated, incarcerated, and even murdered every non-Jew who disagreed with the Nazi policy. I highly recommend the excellent book, *The Hiding Place*, written by Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman whose family took care of Jews in their home in Amsterdam during that time. The book chronicles how the Nazis crushed those who disagreed with their anti-Semitic policies. Corrie's entire family was arrested and thrown into torturous prison camps, where her sister and father died. Only by an administrative error did Corrie herself escape death in the gas chambers. This kind of thing has happened again and again under governments that abandon God's instructions about right and wrong.

¹² Nobel, *Understanding the Times*, p. 92

¹³ *ibid* p.95

¹⁴ Copied from Gordon H Clark's article, "The Ethics of Abortion," as published in The Trinity Foundation's book, *Against the World*, p.101.

¹⁵ Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* Episode 10, The Final Choices.

According to Dr. Randy Guliuzza, it is happening in American medicine now: On March 9, 2009, President Barak Obama ordered that federal tax money be used to promote medical research through harvesting the stem cells of – and thus destroying – human embryos. His rationale? To restore “scientific integrity.” That same year, Dr. Guliuzza commented on this in his article, “Consensus Science: The Rise Of A Scientific Elite.” He explained that “‘scientific integrity’ would not mean keeping the scientific process from going awry, but rather it meant keeping scientific outcomes in line with policy. How? By empowering an atheist scientific elite who will decree – without debate and by consensus opinion only – the scientific validity of all bioethical issues, not just the killing of embryos for research.”¹⁶

The late Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard once said, “Our [scientists’] ways of learning about the world are strongly influenced by the social preconceptions and biased modes of thinking that each scientist must apply to any problem. The stereotype of a fully rational and objective ‘scientific method’ with individual scientists as logical and interchangeable robots, is self-serving mythology.”¹⁷ This, of course shows how important it is to start with the right source of truth before you develop your understanding of life and the rules by which life should be governed!

So we’ve looked at some of the results of letting men make the rules without reference to the God of the Bible. What are the results of accepting the God of the Bible as the standard of right and wrong? I see four results:

When God makes the rules

1. **The rules don’t change.** They don’t evolve, and they can’t be explained away. This removes arbitrariness and injustice from ethics.
 - Mal. 3:6 “...I, Jehovah, do not change; therefore you... are not consumed.”
 - Num. 23:19 “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor is He the son of a man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”
 - James 1:17 “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning.”
2. **There is Blessing.** When we do what our Creator likes, we will find ourselves in step with the design of the universe rather than fighting against the nature of things, and furthermore we will find ourselves in step with God Himself and enjoying His positive favor.
 - Deut. 6:18 “Do what is right and good in the sight of Jehovah that it may be well with you and that you may go in and possess the good land which Jehovah promised to your fathers.”
 - 1 Pet. 3:12 “For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears unto their supplication, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”
 - Psalm 1:1-3 “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers: But his delight is in the law of Jehovah, and on His law he meditates day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also doth not wither. And whatever he does will prosper.”

¹⁶ www.icr.org/article/4590

¹⁷ Gould, S. J. 1994. In the Mind of the Beholder. *Natural History*. 103 (2): 15

- 3. It removes the fear of man.** That makes over 6 billion people you don't have to worry about what they think of you. The one true God is all that counts.
- Matt. 10:28 "...don't be afraid of those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul, but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."
 - Prov. 29:25 "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever puts his trust in Jehovah will be safe."
 - 1 Sam. 12:20b "...do not turn aside from following Jehovah, but serve [Him] with all your heart"
- 4. God's rules are just and fair.** They bring true freedom.
- Micah 6:8 "Man, He has shown you what is good and what Jehovah requires of you: but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."
 - Psalm 19:7-11 "The law of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul. The testimony of Jehovah is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of Jehovah are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of Jehovah is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of Jehovah is clean, enduring for ever: The ordinances of Jehovah are true and righteous altogether... In keeping them there is great reward."
 - Prov. 14:34 "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."

The promises that the God of the Bible offers in His word are very attractive! However, it takes faith to believe Him at His word, and it takes wisdom and courage to cut a different course from the world around us. The contrast between God making the rules and man making the rules isn't always so easy to see. Far too often, we try to have it both ways. We say we believe that our God makes the rules, but we live like men make the rules. This is an epidemic problem, and I see it happening in several ways:

Social pressure tempts us to call evil what is not evil

When enough people put pressure on us to call something evil, even if our ethical standard does not call it evil, we have a tendency to fudge and call something evil when it isn't really evil.

For instance, in February 2010, Sean McDowell, son of a famous Christian apologist, debated ethics against a fellow high school teacher and atheist, James Corbett. In the course of the webcast debate, Sean brought up evidence that atheists have no reason to say that the Holocaust was bad. Corbett knew that the audience would be against him if he was consistent with his atheistic view on ethics, so, instead of being consistent with his beliefs, he agreed with McDowell that it was bad for the Nazis to kill all those Jews. He caved in to peer pressure. (At least that's my interpretation of what happened.¹⁸)

Christians do the same thing. Here's an example that might be shocking at first: SLAVERY. Because slavery is socially unacceptable in America, and because we have been told all our lives how evil slavery is, Christians tend to unequivocally call slavery evil. However, the God of the Bible has not called slavery evil. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that slavery is wrong! It is the worldview of Humanism that determines slavery to be wrong, and it is easy to see why: subjecting one human being to another human being is demeaning the god of Humanism, which is the human being.

¹⁸ You can decide for yourself by listening to the debate at <http://www.brianauten.com/Apologetics/mcdowell-corbett-debate.mp3>

In the Bible, however, God teaches something different: He teaches us in Exodus 21 that slavery was a valid course of action for someone who had experienced economic failure. Furthermore the Bible teaches us that debt is slavery (Prov. 22:7), and that slavery is a tool that God planned in advance to use to discipline His people (Gen. 15:13, 2 Chr. 12:8, Jer. 25:14). Surprisingly, Jesus did not speak out against slavery – almost all the “good guys” in His parables owned slaves (Mat. 8:9-10, 10:24-25, 13:27-28, 21:34, 22:3ff, 24:45ff, 25:14ff, Luke 15:22, 17:7ff). Paul likewise told slaves who had become Christians to remain slaves unless and until they could purchase their freedom, while also teaching Christians to avoid having to become a slave if possible (1 Cor. 7:21ff, Rom. 13:8, Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22, 1 Tim 6:1, Titus 2:9).

Slavery (as the Bible speaks of it, which includes the concepts of “debt” and of “employment”) is a necessary part of any economic system in this fallen world because there are always going to be people who either fail at in running their own business or who don’t want to run their own independent business and need employment. The problem is not slavery *per se* but rather the problem is slavery when it is not practiced according to the rules God gave in the Bible. (See Ex. 21:1ff, 23:12, Lev. 25:39ff, Deut. 23:15-16, Job 31:13, and Col. 4:1 for Biblical laws regarding slavery.) Following God’s standards regarding slavery, such as not kidnapping people and selling them, but rather making the years of service a matter of mutual agreement between the prospective master and slave (Ex. 21), would keep slavery from being bad. What’s bad, according to Christian thinking, is stepping away from God’s guidelines in any human activity.

So, Biblically speaking, a Christian should not give in to other people’s opinions and make the unequivocal statement that slavery is bad. Please understand, I am not campaigning to reinstate slavery as it was in 19th Century America, but what I am trying to do is use one example to challenge you not to allow other people’s opinions of what is right and wrong to influence you into calling something wrong which God never said was wrong. This is the heart of legalism: calling something wrong that isn’t necessarily wrong.

Legalism

In one Christian community I lived in, it was considered wrong for a woman ever to cut her hair. But did they all have insanely long hair? No. They found a loophole: they reasoned that if it’s a sin to *cut* their hair, then it must not be a sin to shorten their hair by some other means than cutting! So, most of the women in that community shortened their hair by burning the ends off, and thus they considered themselves good Christians. The sad thing is that nowhere in the Bible does it say that women can’t cut their hair, so this community’s practice regarding hairstyles was merely man-made rules and workarounds, not Biblical Christianity after all.

Reaching a little further back in history, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in his historical fiction book about the medieval *White Company*, tells the humorous story of a monk who was exiled from his monastery for rescuing a drowning woman because it was considered a sin to touch or even look at a woman, and he had obviously touched this woman in order to lift her out of the river. Sometimes it’s humorous the rules we try to impose on each other.

Legalism was alive and well back in Jesus’ day, too: When Jesus healed a man’s withered hand during a synagogue meeting, the Jews legalistically tried to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, because He had performed the healing on a Sabbath day in which God had said to do no regular work (Mat. 12:10). Jesus said, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat... and they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger” (Mat. 23:2&4).

Christians are guilty of a million other ways of adding on to God's rules. Three that come immediately to mind are: 1) prohibitions that some Christians have against dating someone of another race, 2) prohibitions of some Christian organizations against all alcohol use, and 3) prohibitions of whole denominations against certain ways of Christian baptism. Usually the people that came up with these practices were trying to avoid significant problems, but they ended up being more restrictive than the Bible allows, creating a form of legalism. God's word tells us that He wants us to learn "not to be above the things which have been written" (1 Cor. 4:6).

What can we do about legalism? We must apply Jesus' command: "Judge not, lest you be judged, for by the standard you judge, you will be judged" (Mat. 7:1). This does NOT mean that we should abandon all attempts to decide whether certain things are good or bad by God's standards, for we are commanded to be discriminating in 1 Cor. 2:15. What it DOES mean is that God will hold us accountable to the same standards that we enforce upon other people. Furthermore, we should not add rules to God's word and judge other people by the extra rules we have created. Sometimes our convictions are based on assumptions and inferences that other Christians will never be convinced of, and when that is the case, we need to extend the benefit of the doubt.

Judging God

Not only do we have outside influences competing with God's system of ethics, and tempting us to call good evil, we also have our own hearts that naturally want to rebel against God and take the final authority away from God to judge what is right and what is wrong.

Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, worried that if his people kept going down to the southern kingdom of Judah to worship God in the temple of Jerusalem, his kingdom would be threatened. "And Jeroboam said in his heart, 'If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of Jehovah at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn... unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me...' At this the king took counsel and made two calves of gold, and he said... 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt...' And this thing was a sin..." (1 Kings 12:26-30). In other words, Jeroboam told his people that God's commands regarding worship were "too much" and that they needed to make idols to keep the nation together. Can we get away with fudging on what is right and wrong, in order to keep our job, like Jeroboam did? No way. The Bible goes on to say, "This thing became sin unto the house of Jeroboam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from off the face of the earth" (1 Kings 13:34).

I can already hear someone saying, "What? Destroy a whole family over worshipping the one true God, just in a different place and way? My God would never do that! ... The God I know is a loving God; He would never be so mean!"

Have you ever heard comments like that? Those who do not want to submit to the God of the Bible as He has actually revealed Himself, like to re-make Him according to their own liking. We like to pick and choose the parts of the Bible that say things we like about God and ignore the rest. We all like the "God is love" verse because it sounds nice, however, it is rebellion against God to only believe the "nice God" passages. God commands us to accept all that He says in the Bible, including passages like Habakkuk 3:12-13: "You [Jehovah] march though the land in indignation, threshing the nations in anger. You went out to save Your people... You crushed the head of the house of evil, laying him bare from bottom to neck."

Maybe you aren't trying to fudge on God's ethics or ignore what the Bible says about God, but when evil gets personal, that's when many people decide it is time to take over the role of God

and condemn Him for causing pain in our lives or in the lives of loved ones: “How could God allow my mother to become so painfully sick? ... If God is good, why didn’t He stop that cancer? He is therefore either not good or He’s is not very powerful...” If you haven’t heard that line yet, you will before long, or you will be tempted to think it yourself. The fundamental ethical problem with statements like this is that they steal from God the right to decide what is right and what is wrong. It is a way of saying, “I don’t trust you to make choices in discerning good from bad; I want my preferences to decide what is good and what is bad.” It’s like the toddler in the kitchen saying, “Mom, I hate green beans, I don’t trust you to feed me good food anymore; I’m just going to eat from the candy jar from now on.”

In God’s perspective, the problems with this world are not a result of any inability on His part to stop bad things from happening; the problems are because we humans want to rebel against Him and make ourselves out to be gods. In other words, the problem is not with God, the problem is human sin against God.

Was it bad that Joseph in the Bible was kidnapped and sold as a slave by his brothers? Yes. Was it bad that Joseph was thrown in jail for years because he was accused of taking advantage of his master’s wife in Egypt when he had done nothing wrong? Yes. Was it bad that Joseph was separated from his family and sent to Egypt? No. Joseph himself said to his brothers later, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20). Joseph recognized that even though evil was intentionally done to him, God was intentionally doing good to him and ultimately to his entire family – and the Jewish nation that came out of them.

Like Joseph, we can compare what God says in the Bible with the actions of people and declare whether or not they are doing what God says is right, but we must not say that God has done what is bad; that would be to usurp the place of God and stand in judgment over Him. We don’t know all the good that God will bring from the painful things that are happening to us right now.

God is not helplessly standing by, wringing His hands and wishing the people would quit being so mean. Psalm 2 paints a rather different picture, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot vanity?... He who sits in the heavens will laugh... Then He will say, ‘I have set up my king on my holy hill...’” (Ps. 2:1-6). King Jesus is unlimited in His power, and God laughs in derision at people who think they can control the world. Paul also teaches that God is a sovereign Lord. Despite the floggings, stonings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, and other injustices in Paul’s life, he still confidently stated, “God works all things together for good” (Rom 8:28). By the way, I think there’s a problem with translating this passage, “All things work together for good,” because the subject “God” is there in the most ancient manuscripts, and the context clearly implies that God actively works all things together for good, not that blind chance somehow results in events working out for good. We humans do not have the right to define what is good and what is bad. God is the one who is working out all things for good as He defines good.

Suffering for good

St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, “Everywhere a greater joy is preceded by a greater suffering.” Often, painful things in our lives are God’s method of discipline. No one is so perfect that they could not use some refining. Suffering is God’s way of maturing us and forcing us to leave our remaining idolatries and cling to Him alone. We may feel that the refining suffering is far more intense than we would expect for ourselves or for our loved ones, but who are we to judge what is just when we are the ones being disciplined? Does your toddler have a good sense of how many licks it takes to set him straight when he gets into the forbidden candy jar? No, but a good parent does.

Just because something painful happens does not mean that God is cruel; He may be bringing discipline out of love. As David said to God, “It is good to me that I have been afflicted, in order that I learn Your statutes” (Psalm 119:71).

“Whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and whips every son whom He accepts... Furthermore, we had our fleshly fathers to discipline us, and we gave them respect. Shall we not much more be in subjection to the Father of spirits, and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them, but He, for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. All discipline seems for the present not joyous but grievous, yet afterward it yields peaceable fruit unto those who have been exercised by it, even the fruit of righteousness.” (Hebrews 12:6-11)

But what if you have done what is right and painful things happen? This does not make it right for you to start taking over the place of God. Job’s haunting question to his wife bears consideration, “Shall I accept good things from God and not bad things?” (Job 2:10). Jesus promised that we would suffer (Mark 10:30), so the Apostle Peter taught us to patiently entrust ourselves to our God who judges justly:

“...if you do good, and suffer for it, take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow His steps - He who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth, who, when He was reviled, reviled not again, when He suffered, threatened not, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously, who Himself bore our sins in His body upon the tree, that we, having died unto sins, might live unto righteousness, by whose stripes you were healed.” (1 Pet. 2:20-24)

Not Fatalism

I think it’s interesting that other theistic religions don’t seem to have a problem with submitting to the decrees of a god who is greater than humans. The ancient Greeks took it for granted that their many gods were powerful and capricious and sometimes did mean things to people. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, it is taken for granted that if the sea-god Poseidon had a bone to pick with the main character, Odysseus was going to have a difficult trip on his boat, and there was little he could do about it. Similarly the animistic cultures who recognize the power exercised by the spirit world on the natural world, accept as a matter of course that sometimes the spirits want things that are undesirable to the human community. Sacrifice a woman and her child in order to end a drought? Well, if that’s what must be done, then it must be done. The Hindu religion has a similar mindset with its doctrine of karma, and the Muslims submit to the will of Allah, for after all, the word “Islam” means “submission.”

However, these other religions do not have a doctrine of sin, discipline, and righteousness like what God teaches in the Bible, so when something bad happens, they figure, it just happens: “It is the will of God.” You can’t stay the hands of a god when he’s got a bee in his bonnet. Hindus believe you should not disturb the cycle of karma by helping a poor or sick person because bad things just have to be endured so that maybe a future life will be better. Such fatalism, however, is not what the Holy Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches humility, patience, and trust before a perfectly good and just God, but it also teaches us to intervene against evil. Abraham expressed it correctly when he was horrified to hear that God was about to wipe out an entire town where his nephew lived. He begged God to withhold this severe judgment for the sake of the righteous people still living in the city, but at the end, he stated his faith that God knows what is best, saying, “Will not the judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18:25). In the book of Job, after chapters of the man struggling to trust God despite a host of troublesome events, God says, “Shall he that finds fault contend with the

Almighty? ... And Job... said, "...I put my hand over my mouth" (Job 40:1-4). But Job spoke up and reprimanded his visitors when they said things that weren't true.

David, despite any elaborate justifications he may have worked up to make himself feel o.k. for committing adultery with Bathsheba, finally said to God in Psalm 51:4, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Your sight, for You are just when You speak, and right when You judge." In other words, as my Hebrew professor, Dwight Zeller, paraphrased it, "It is against you, God, especially you, that I have committed this sin and done evil – and you are the one calling the shots, that it is indeed evil. All of which (my confession, Your determination of what is evil, and my petition for forgiveness) will ultimately demonstrate that you are the just One, when you speak condemningly, and You are entirely without blame, when, and in the way, You judge... I am the king of Israel and do often judge, but in this case, You alone are my judge, and I have done sinfully, and You are the one who will be vindicated, not me."¹⁹

Antinomianism – a misunderstanding

One more insidious form of calling good Evil is antinomianism (anti = against + nomos = law) – the denial that any outside law should be imposed upon us. I have already pointed out some problems earlier with Secular libertarianism, a form of antinomianism which says we should get rid of all the laws and let everybody do what they want. I don't see a need to pursue that farther. However, in Christian circles, there are also some people who argue that God no longer has a law code and that we shouldn't either. It is this "Christian" form of antinomianism I wish to address further.

I've heard Christians actually argue that the 10 commandments are no longer binding. Why? They quote scriptures like: "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, not like the old covenant... I will write my law on their inward parts..." (Jer. 31:31-33) and "We're no longer under law but under Grace" (Rom. 6:15b).

In his book on Biblical Ethics, Robertson McQuilken answers this misunderstanding well. He states:

"[I]t is important to emphasize that the New Testament uses the term "law" to refer to:

1. the moral requirements of God (Rom. 2:14-15, 4:15, 7:2-22, 8:3-7, 13:8-10, 1 Cor. 7:19, Gal. 3:13, 5:14, 6:2, 1 Tim. 1:8, Heb. 8:10ff, 10:16, James 1:25, 4:11),
2. the Mosaic system of regulations (John 1:17, Rom. 5:13 & 20, Gal. 3:17-23, 4:4-5 & 21, 1 Cor. 9:20), and
3. the figurative use of the law referring to obedience to the Mosaic law as a means of salvation. (Rom. 3:20 "...by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified... for through the law comes the knowledge of sin." (See also: Gal. 2:6 & 21, 3:2-18, Phil. 3:9)
4. [as well as others]

McQuilken continues, "Because 'law' is used in many different ways and often with several meanings overlapping, it is important to be sure from the context which meaning was intended by the author. Otherwise we shall be applying a teaching concerning the law that does not actually apply. For example, if we speak of being free from the law, and use this to refer to the moral law of God, when in fact Scripture is referring to the condemnation resulting from the law or the Old Testament system of sacrifices, we are making a great error."²⁰

¹⁹ <http://www.sangredecristoseminary.org/DFZ%20Exegesis.pdf> , p.12

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 36.

Three Components of Biblical Law

We might further break the law of Moses down into three components:

1. **Ceremonial** Law – The Ceremonial law would be those laws regarding offering sacrifices and governing the rituals at the temple in the Old Testament. These ceremonial laws have been superseded by the things Jesus instituted as our great High Priest. The whole book of Hebrews tells us that these things were “shadows” of what we would experience in the New Covenant. For instance, we no longer offer sacrifices, and we no longer have the presence of God localized in a particular temple. However, there are many important principles which can be gleaned from the ceremonial law, such as the importance of scripture-reading, singing, and praying in worship services, the importance of confessing sin and being cleansed of sin before God, and even little things like whether or not it’s o.k. to have artwork in church. Those are all in the ceremonial law.
2. **Civil** Law is the next category. Civil law has to do with the government of people. It includes the rules given to kings and judges to follow in governing the nation of Israel. Civil law would include things like how to judge an accidental murder vs. an intentional murder, or what to do if a dead body is found and nobody seems to know who the murderer is. That can all be found in the civil laws of the Bible (See Num. 35).

There are, of course, many instances in the Bible where believers worked in the context of a civil government that was not based on God’s law – Daniel the prophet and Paul the Apostle, for example. Yet God did not condemn them for working within the context of the Persian or Roman government. Instead these men of God did what they could to affirm what was right in those governments (Rom. 13), and they did what they could to reform those things that they recognized as out of line with God’s principles of civil justice. (For instance, Paul used his rights as a Roman citizen to keep himself from being flogged without a trial, and he appealed his case to Rome when it became apparent that local politics were obstructing his freedom of speech.)

3. **Moral** Law is the third category.²¹ This would basically be the 10 commandments: Do not steal; Do not worship the wrong god, Honor your parents, etc. These things define right and wrong behavior for all people at all times and are not limited to Israel.

Note, however, that these three categories of Abrogated Ceremonial law, Non-binding Civil law, and Universally-binding Moral law are not in separate categories in the Old Testament. They’re all mixed up together, and many of them are inter-related so closely that it is difficult to actually take the laws of the Old Testament and figure out what category each one goes into. For instance, murder crosses all three categories because it is a moral evil, yet the civil ruler has the authority to go to war or to exercise the death sentence on a murderer, and it was the shedding of Jesus’ blood that fulfilled the conditions of the ceremonial law for forgiveness of sin. So, although the categories of Ceremonial, Civil, and Moral law may be useful for thinking about the Old Testament laws, they don’t answer all of our questions. The law is just something we have to meditate on so that we grow in wisdom over a lifetime.

Are the Old Testament Laws still good?

Towards the end of the “not under law but under grace” passage in Romans, we find this remarkable statement, “...the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, and righteous, and good.” (Rom. 7:12, cf. 1 Tim. 1:8, Psalm 19:7, 119:1) Here is the Bible’s answer to the question in the heading of this paragraph. Yes. And, what God calls good, we should not call evil.

²¹ These three categories come from the *Westminster Confession*, Ch. 19

There is nothing wrong with the 10 commandments. Furthermore, there is nothing wrong with all the rest of the law. Nowhere does the Bible tell us that any of its laws are bad. Granted, the law does not save us, and there are certainly ceremonies that the New Testament writers declared have passed away with the coming of Jesus, but, as Paul wrote to Timothy, “all scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching” (2 Tim 3:16). The Old Testament was the only scripture around at that time. Even the civil laws of the Old Testament are profitable for training in righteousness, because that’s what God has said. To call them bad is to forsake Biblical ethics and to go back to man deciding what is good and bad.

For instance, the requirement that everyone in society rest on the seventh day is good. In the French revolution, the secular humanistic thinkers tried to re-make laws to rebel against God. Included in their mad dash to make man-made law, they created a calendar system based on ten-day weeks. Productivity would go up, they claimed, as the old system of church laws was abolished. Well, productivity didn’t go up; it went down, because workers were not getting enough rest. God made people to need one day in seven to rest. The French decimal calendar also didn’t work because it ignored the God-given cycles of the moon that we call months, putting the French out of sync with the natural order of creation. The decimal calendar had to be abandoned. When you try to make your own laws in defiance of God’s law, it creates more problems.

“What? Are you saying we should go back to stoning children like the O.T. law says?” Well, I don’t imagine that I can come up with a better way of organizing civil society than God can, so let’s look at that law. It’s in Deuteronomy 21:18-21: “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son that will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they chasten him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother should grab him... and they shall say unto the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice. He is a glutton, and a drunkard.’ And all the men of his city shall stone him to death...”

Note that this is not talking about a child: he is old enough to be an alcoholic and to establish residence in “his city” as opposed to his parent’s city. Note also that this son has been a long time in rebellion; he has been exhorted and disciplined by his parents until they have given up on him. Next, note that it is the parents who are to bring the son before the elders. The parents – the people who would naturally love him the most – are going to be slower than anyone else in reaching the conclusion that their son should receive capital punishment. Finally note that there is one more safeguard against exasperated parents giving a son up rashly: the elders of the city are to judge the case and make the final decision of whether the rebellious son should be stoned to death.

Whether or not you believe that this particular law is for today, I hope you can see that it contains safeguards which should remain as important principles in the justice system today, such as the denial of anonymous accusations, and the right to a trial. The format of my book doesn’t permit an exhaustive investigation into the wisdom of the rest of the O.T. law, but let me pique your interest with a brief list of good ideas from the laws of the Bible:

- Sanitation measures: including washing hands (Lev. 15:11), and not eating meat that has been sitting out unrefrigerated for three days (Lev. 7:18),
- Civil justice measures: including the requirement that a conviction of a crime must not be merely by the testimony of only one witness (Deut 17:6), and the requirement that repeat offenders be punished more severely than first-time offenders (Ex. 21:36),

- Business ethics: including forbidding dishonest weights and measures (Prov. 20:10), and requiring truth-telling (Zech. 8:16).

God's laws are good!

Theonomy and Reconstructionism?

So, am I saying that we need to scrap the U.S. government and substitute it with the book of Deuteronomy? No. But I am saying that anyone who takes a position in the government of our city, county, state, and federal government should submit themselves to God as the ultimate decider of what is right and wrong, should read the O.T. laws over and over so that they have a growing grasp of the way God thinks and the principles in the Bible by which to decide the best ways of governing (Deut 17:18), and they should implement those principles by repealing laws which call evil Good and good Evil – as God defines good and evil, and by enacting and enforcing laws which call good Good and evil Evil – as God defines good and evil in the Bible.

“But you can't legislate morality!” Perhaps you've heard that objection, but if you are consistent with ethics, you'll see that there is no such thing as a law without a religiously-ethical basis. All law is fundamentally rooted in the likes or dislikes of someone who acts as deity. Somebody's ethical standards are going to be implemented when it comes to making laws for any community. The question should not be, “How can we keep law secular?” Rather the question should be, “Whose standards of right and wrong will be used to decide good laws from bad ones?”

Summary of Problem #1: Calling good Evil

Isaiah 5:20 warns us, “Woe to those who say to evil, ‘Good!’ and to good, ‘Evil!’ setting darkness for light and light for darkness, setting bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe those who are wise in their eyes and in front of their faces consider themselves intelligent... 24. Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble and flame withers the dry grass, their root will be like rotteness, and their flower will go up like dust, for they have rejected the law of Jehovah of Hosts, and the word of the Holy One of Israel they have despised.”

So the first problem is calling things evil which God does not call evil. This compromise may be due to peer pressure or due to your own rebellious heart against God, or it may be due to a misunderstanding of what the Bible says about God's law, but regardless, such compromise is inconsistent with Biblical Christianity. God alone can decide what is evil, and we must stand behind His decisions, not adding to them legalistically or taking away from them. Now, let's look at the opposite problem:

Ethics Problem #2: Calling evil Good

Prov. 8:13a says, “The fear of Jehovah is to hate evil.” That means worshipers of God should identify evil and hate it. However, humans have a tendency to fail to recognize as evil what God calls evil. We even call evil things good: Isaiah 41:7 “The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith, and he who smoothes with the hammer, him who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, ‘It is good,’ and they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot totter.” In Isaiah's day, they looked at an idol and said, “It is good!” But it is not o.k. to call an idol Good.

Hananiah, Mischael, and Azariah (a.k.a. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) believed this: It is not o.k. to call an idol good. But these guys lived in Persia, where the king was believed to be god over all gods. And since it is a function of deity to decide right from wrong, those Persian kings made up laws for the whole nation to follow. One time, the king of Persia told everyone to bow down to an image that looked like him. Did Hananiah, Mischael, and Azariah obey that law? No. Why not? Because it contradicted God's law which says not to worship any other god

besides Jehovah! They refused to bow to that idol and call that morally evil law Good. They were willing to call evil Evil, even if it meant they would lose their jobs. Even if it meant they would be thrown into the fiery furnace, they refused to bow and declare that idol good.

Today we have many opportunities to call evil Evil in the face of a culture which calls so many evil things good: For instance, God calls homosexuality evil: Lev. 18:22 “Do not lie with a man, as lying with a woman; this is an abomination” (cf. Lev. 20:13, Rom. 1:27). This, of course, is not acceptable to say in our post-modern American culture, because it might offend somebody who has made up their own contradictory ethic. But the ethics of Biblical Christianity are not driven by whether or not a practice is offensive to other people; they are driven by faithfulness to what our God says He hates and loves.

We also find the temptation to compromise when it comes to political candidates, supporting a candidate whom we believe to be the lesser of two evils. If a candidate is doing anything that violates God’s principles, then it is part of righteousness to expose that evil and call it evil.

God Calls Us To Declare His Ethical Standards

Not speaking up against wrong is wrong. Being tolerant of evil is not essentially different from practicing evil (Ps. 49:13, Rom. 1:32). Tolerant attitudes among Christians toward what God calls sin is a capitulation to the Secular Humanist ethic that says we can all make up our own rules. We must call evil Evil and stop being hypocrites when it comes to ethics.

This does not mean, however, that we should be rude and arrogant in presenting God’s ethical standards to the world. Kindly warning those who are doing what God hates while inviting them in to what God loves is what Christians are called to do. This is very different from being hateful and obnoxious and mean.

This also does not mean that we should be silent in points of agreement with other worldviews. Some Christians are confused because they think that, since Secular Humanists agree with them that things like the Holocaust are bad, therefore everyone thinks they are wrong for the same reason. People might think the Holocaust was bad because one group of humans was trying to wipe another race of humans off the map, whereas that is not the reason God would say the Holocaust was bad, seeing as He actually commanded Joshua to wipe out entire races of people in Canaan. There are probably many sins wrapped up in the Holocaust, for which we could Biblically say it was bad, including hating good, man-worship, oppression of the poor, and murder. But just because Secular Humanists and Christians agree that something is bad does not mean they have the same reason for calling it bad. Christians need to be consistent in explaining why evil is evil. Things are not evil simply because they are socially unacceptable or simply because life is harmed; they are evil because God says they are evil.

This responsibility of Christians to declare God’s ethical standards is part of our priestly role. In Deut. 31:9-11 it says, “Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests... and unto all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying, ‘At the end of every seven years... you must read this law before all Israel in their hearing.’” One of the roles of the priests was to tell the people what God’s laws were, and we should do the same today. In 1 Pet. 2:9, Christians are called “a kingdom of priests... that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Do you see that? Priests proclaim God’s excellencies! We should explain what is right and wrong in church as well as to those outside the church – even to government officials. When the English Puritans were writing out their doctrinal standards in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* they said that one of the things church synods and councils can

do is to give “advice, for satisfaction of conscience [to] ... the civil magistrate.”²² It’s our job to tell the world what God says is right and wrong.

Telemachus was a Christian during the time of the Roman empire when people would go to the Coliseum and watch gladiators fight and kill each other for entertainment. Telemachus went to the Coliseum himself one day and was horrified at what he saw. He got so upset that he jumped down into the arena and ran up to the gladiators, yelling, “For God’s sake, stop it!” The gladiators killed Telemachus, but when the emperor heard what had happened, he decreed an end to the gladiator fights. You see, the emperor at the time was a Christian, but he lacked the resolve to bring an end to the sport of watching men kill each other. The courageous act of Telemachus gave the emperor the courage to call evil Evil. Could God be calling you to be a modern-day Telemachus who calls evil Evil and imparts courage to people in our government with the political authority to stop and punish evil?

Civil Disobedience

Remember Hananiah, Mischael, and Azariah’s refusal to bow down to the idol of the king of Persia? Although Christians normally should honor, support, and obey our governing authorities, there are times when we must violate a man-made law in order to obey God’s law. The principle behind civil disobedience, however, is submission to proper authority, not rebellion. Let me repeat that: Submission, not rebellion! God is the only one who can truly decide what is right and wrong, so if humans enact a law that commands us to do what is evil in God’s sight or a law which commands us not to do what is good in God’s sight, we believe that God’s law is higher than man’s law, and that God’s law must be obeyed rather than man’s law in such cases.

This was the case in the Apostle’s time when Peter and John were arrested and commanded by their authorities to stop preaching about Jesus. The authorities were not telling the apostles to go out and kill people or rob banks; they just commanded the apostles to refrain from doing something that God called good. Peter told the rulers, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), and he kept on preaching Jesus, even though it was now forbidden by his authorities.

Breaking the law is not something to take lightly, however. It should be unusual. If we can at all give the benefit of the doubt to our government, we should comply with the laws of the land. Furthermore, if we decide to violate a law out of conscience, we must be willing to suffer the punishment for breaking the law, even though we believe it is an immoral or unjust law. Hananiah, Mischael, and Azariah told their king that even if God did not deliver them – even if they got burned alive in the fiery furnace, they would still not worship any God but Jehovah (Dan. 3:18). The king had decreed the death sentence, and these men of God decided they were willing to die in order to obey God’s law. This kind of resolve thrilled God’s heart, and He delivered them, proving to the world that the ethical authority of God was greater than the ethical authority of the King of Persia.

Good Behavior

Submission to the God of the Bible will result in good behavior. This behavior is a matter of the heart, not of mere outward performance. John Murray, in his ethics book, *Principles of Conduct*, reminds us that, “If we are thinking of the notes of biblical piety, none is more characteristic than the fear of the Lord.”²³ It is not out of a desire to look good to other people that Christians should do good; rather, Christians should do good out of reverence to the Lord Jesus.

²² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31:5

²³ Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p.229

The Apostle Peter was particularly concerned that Christians live their everyday lives in an ethical manner. In 2 Pet. 3:10-13 he wrote:

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what kind of people ought you to be in all holy behavior and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the burning heavens will be dissolved, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? But, according to His promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells!”

Peter also exhorted Christian wives that their good behavior could win over the hearts of their disobedient husbands, and he exhorted persecuted believers that by keeping a clear conscience, their good behavior would put their critics to shame (1 Pet. 3:2, 13-16). Good behavior, conforming to God’s standard of good in the Bible, should characterize Christians. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by his good behavior his works in meekness of wisdom” (James 3:13-18).

Man is not good; God is.

The thesis of this chapter on ethics is that your god defines right and wrong, but one God is better than all the others. When it comes to ethics, man does not make for a good god. Why? Not only are we too limited in knowledge, we are also not basically good. We cannot accurately tell good from evil. Remember the opening illustration of the toddler in the kitchen? Just like that toddler who would make all kinds of foolish and harmful decisions on its own, so, mankind does not have the capacity to come up with an adequate system of right and wrong without the aid of the all-wise and loving God of the Bible. The Bible says, “Do you... speak righteousness? Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men? No, in heart you work wickedness...” (Psalm 58:1-2).

However, the Holy Bible authoritatively affirms that God is good:

- In Mark 10:18, Jesus said, “...No one is good except one – that is God...”
- “Jehovah is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Psalm 145:9).
- “Oh taste and see that Jehovah is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.” (Psalm 34:8, cf. 100:5)
- “Jehovah is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him” (Nahum 1:7).
- “Jehovah is good unto those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him” (Lam. 3:25).

The Supreme Good

The supreme good in any worldview would be the happiness and pleasure of the god of that worldview. If you are a Secular Humanist, then your god is probably yourself, so you would consider your pleasure and happiness to be the supreme good. Most Secular Humanists would consider recreation to be the most important thing in life. Corliss Lamont, in his book *Philosophy of Humanism*, wrote that as long as man “pursues activities that are healthy, socially useful, and in accordance with reason, pleasure will generally accompany them; and happiness, the supreme good, will be the eventual result.”²⁴

The position of Biblical Christianity, on the other hand, is that Jesus is God, so His happiness and pleasure is the highest good. Therefore worshipping Jesus is the most important thing. John Piper,

²⁴ Noebel, *Understanding the Times*, p. 93.

in his book, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, wrote, “[W]e glorify God by enjoying Him forever. This is the essence of Christian Hedonism. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him... It is what the whole universe is about. The radical implication is that pursuing pleasure in God is our highest calling. It is essential to all virtue and all reverence.”²⁵

What We Must Do

The fact that God is good and man is not, and the fact that pleasing God is the highest good, call for a response. This calls for trust in God – whose name is Jesus – to do what is right. It also calls for submission to God so that we willingly bow and call Jesus our Lord and Master. Here are five things we can do:

- 1. Believe that He is good:** Will you repent of being suspicious of the quality of God’s providence for you and repent of being afraid of the future? Will you seek Him and accept His tender mercies for you, even if they include excruciating times of refining?
- 2. Trust Him to keep you safe:** Since God is good, will you run to Him and take refuge in Him? Will you keep your trust and hope in Him to protect you from all that is evil in this world?
- 3. Study His ethical system:** When you are trying to decide what is right, will you look to God and grow in the knowledge of His law? Will you read the Bible or listen to it being read and taught on a regular basis?
- 4. Obey His word:** Will you submit to His word on what is good and evil, and implement His standards in your spheres of influence? This will include refusing to follow the crowd, walking in the good patterns of behavior taught in the Bible, explaining God’s standards of right and wrong, and may even include disobeying bad man-made laws.
- 5. Praise Him:** Will you offer prayers of praise to God, believing that He is good? Will you sing praise to Him today? “Praise Jehovah, for Jehovah is good! Sing praises unto His name, for it is pleasant” (Psalm 135:3).

Whate’er My God Ordains is Right

In the mid 1600’s a man in Germany named Gastorius, become seriously ill. Samuel Rodigast was a Christian teacher in another town, but he was a good friend of Gastorius, so he wrote a poem and sent it to his dying friend, encouraging him to trust and submit to Christ. By the mercy of God, Gastorius recovered from his illness and lived to write music to Rodigast’s poem.²⁶ Let me close with the words of that hymn:

Whate’er my God ordains is right; His holy will abideth.
I will be still whate’er He doth, And follow where He guideth.
He is my God, though dark my road.
He holds me that I shall not fall,
Wherefore to Him I leave it all.

Whate’er my God ordains is right; He never will deceive me.
He leads me by the proper path; I know He will not leave me.
I take, content, what He hath sent;
His hand can turn my griefs away,
And patiently I wait His day.

²⁵ Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, p. 21.

²⁶ <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/w/h/a/whateerm.htm>

Whate'er my God ordains is right; His loving thought attends me.
No poison can be in the cup That my Physician sends me.
My God is true; each morn anew
I'll trust His grace unending,
My life to Him commending.

Whate'er my God ordains is right; He is my Friend and Father.
He suffers naught to do me harm, Though many storms may gather
Now I may know both joy and woe,
Some day I shall see clearly,
That He hath loved me dearly.

Whate'er my God ordains is right; Though now this cup, in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart, I take it, all unshrinking.
My God is true; each morn anew
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,
And pain and sorrow shall depart.

Whate'er my God ordains is right; Here shall my stand be taken.
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine, Yet I am not forsaken.
My Father's care is round me there;
He holds me that I shall not fall,
And so to Him I leave it all.