

**CBC Sunday School**  
**Christian Ethics: Moral Dilemmas**  
**December 12, 2021**

**I. Discussion Question**

Do you believe in “no-win” situations? Can you describe an experience you’ve had in such a situation? Can you think of any in Scripture?

**II. Definition of Moral Dilemmas**

**A. What is a moral dilemma.**

1. “A moral dilemma is a situation in which there appears to be, or is, a conflict between two or more moral absolutes/norms that allow no exceptions.” Todd Miles, Western Seminary
2. In the previous example of hiding Jewish people from Nazis asking if you are hiding them, the apparent conflict, and hence moral dilemma, involves a clash between the obligation to save innocent life and the duty to speak the truth.

**B. What is not a moral dilemma.**

1. Moral dilemmas are not situations in which doing the right thing is clear in principle, but costly in practice. That is, moral dilemmas are not the same as crises of faith.
  - a. For example, Joseph was not in a moral dilemma in rejecting Potiphar’s wife. If he were a man of lesser integrity, he might have fooled himself into thinking there was some dilemma of ethics. In reality, the right thing to do was clear, but costly. He is lauded because he chose the right and costly thing to do.
  - b. Very often, what we might think are moral dilemmas are not actually moral dilemmas. Most often (if ever – see below) there are not two conflicting absolutes. Rather, doing the right thing is merely challenging, and takes courage. We know what the right thing to do is, we just don’t want the consequences.
2. Moral dilemmas are also not situations in which the right thing to do ought to be clear, but we are either too naïve or too rebellious to do it.
  - a. We can’t excuse all of our disobedience and inability to make difficult choices by saying we were in a moral bind.
  - b. We ought to desire to please and glorify God in all we do.

**III. Moral Dilemma Position: Non-Conflicting Absolutism**

**A. Basic Summary:** Absolute moral norms never actually conflict. There is always a right thing to do that honors God.

1. There is always an action to take that will avoid sin.
2. God’s laws do not conflict, and His character is consistent, therefore if we are following Him there is always a good, godly, and sinless path to walk.

3. In conflicts, there is just about always an “option C” (or D and E) that we have not yet considered.
4. Understanding of absolutes:
  - a. There are many absolutes and many commands of God and many moral laws, which is the reason apparent conflicts seem to (but do not actually) exist.
  - b. Moral norms/absolutes cannot have exceptions, regardless of context, otherwise they would not be moral norms/absolutes.
  - c. Absolutes appear to conflict, but never actually do.
  - d. In any situation, all absolutes/norms should be followed, from the most to the least important (this differs from graded absolutism below).
  - e. Absolutes have to be carefully defined.
    - i. For example, consider the moral norm of wives submitting to husbands. Scripture gives this as a moral command.
      1. However, we recognize there are situations in which the wife should not submit to the husband, such as if a husband is leading the wife into sin.
      2. Therefore, the moral norm of submitting to the husband must be defined carefully to include the distinction that wives should submit so long as the husband is not leading outside the will of God and thus abdicated his right to lead.
    - ii. Consider also the command to submit to governmental authorities.
      1. Clearly, the apostles don’t always follow this command.
      2. So, the command must be defined in such a way to allow for the apostles’ humble, yet real, refusal to obey the government.
      3. It might be that part of submission is peacefully accepting the consequences when we must, under God, disobey.
    - iii. Or, for another example, consider lying. We are called to tell the truth and not bear false witness, and we know God hates lying lips (Proverbs 12:22).
      1. Yet we know deception in warfare is allowed, and that Rahab’s deception seems to be applauded. Therefore it may be appropriate to define the prohibition of lying in such a way that it allows for intentional deception in such circumstances.
      2. Some have suggested a definition of lying as “withholding the truth or speaking untruth to those who are rightfully owed the truth.” There may be a level of relativity and subjectivity in this definition that would make some uncomfortable.
      3. “the ninth commandment will allow us to withhold the truth from those who seek innocent life.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, p. 233
      4. Also consider; Are Rahab or the Hebrew midwives actually praised for their deceptions specifically, or are they praised for their general allegiance to the Hebrew people, with Scripture being silent on their actual deception?

## B. Arguments in Support

1. If absolute norms are not absolute, then there are no norms at all, and all ethics slips into chaos.
2. Moral norms and laws derive from the character of God.
  - a. If they are in conflict, then God's own being and character is conflicted.
  - b. How could God, in all His sovereign wisdom and perfect goodness, create a law that, when followed perfectly, led to contradiction?
  - c. It would be quite cruel of God to leave us in situations wherein we have no choice but to sin.
3. God desires us to be holy and righteous. If this is the case, He must grant us the potential to be holy and righteous in all circumstances.
  - a. Jesus was tempted in every way we are, and yet was without sin.
  - b. If we are called to be like Christ, and glorify God in all that we do, we cannot then be found in a place where that is not possible.
  - c. If there was always a sinless path for Him, then there must be for us as well. Note how often others tried to "trap" him, and yet were unable.
  - d. 1 Corinthians 10:13; "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."
  - e. 1 Corinthians 10:31; "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."
4. God's law is perfect. We are not. Sin is our failure, and not the law's.
  - a. Psalm 119:160; "The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever."
  - b. Psalm 19:7; "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;"
  - c. How could the law of God possibly be at odds with itself? We may be duplicitous, but God's Word is always true, as He is true.
  - d. If we concede that there are situations in which we cannot help but sin, then has not God's law failed us?
  - e. We as Christians accept that we fail the law; we do not however blame the law for our failures.
  - f. Romans 7:12-14; "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin."

## IV. Moral Dilemma Position: Ideal Absolutism

- A. Basic Summary: Absolute norms, ideally speaking, never conflict. In an ideal world – a world without sin – there would always be a right thing to do. In actuality, however, sometimes absolute norms do indeed conflict.
  1. We live in a fallen and broken world, where sometimes sin is inevitable.
  2. Sometimes the lesser of two evils has to be done, and whatever action we take, we may have to confess our shortcomings in the end.

3. Non-conflicting absolutism is nice in theory, but not operable in the “real world” that is marred by sin and sinful systems.
4. Understanding of absolutes:
  - a. As in non-conflicting absolutism, moral laws are normative and non-bending.
  - b. In an ideal world, moral laws/absolutes would be non-conflicting.
  - c. In our fallen world, moral laws do unfortunately, at times, conflict.

**B. Arguments in Support**

1. Consider Matthew 19:1-9. Jesus tells the Pharisees that God’s law and will is that men would not divorce their wives, and that in marriage the two become one, so they should not be separated. However, because of their sinful hearts (i.e. because we do not live in an ideal world), the Law of Moses has allowed divorce.
2. Theoretically this upholds the inflexible nature of God’s character, law, and will, while still also allowing for flexibility and adaptability in the real world.
3. Would interpret Rahab and Hebrew midwives as committing the lesser of two evils. They did indeed sin in lying, but that was the smaller sin, compared to not aligning with the Hebrews. They chose the greater good, and their relatively smaller sin will be forgiven.
4. As those born under Adam, we are already “born in sin.” Romans 5:12; “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...” It should then not alarm us if we find that in this life we cannot avoid sin.

**V. Moral Dilemma Position: Hierarchicalism or Graded Absolutism**

**A. Basic Summary: Absolute moral norms do conflict, and true moral dilemmas do exist.**

1. In these conflicts, the greater moral norm is to receive precedence.
2. In moral dilemmas, no sin is involved, as we can’t be held responsible for being placed in a “no-win” scenario.
3. Our role is not so much to choose the lesser of two evils, but to opt for the greater of two goods.
4. There is a gradation of sin, as well as a gradation of good. (See Ezekiel 8:13, 15, 17; Proverbs 21:27.) So, certain norms are more imperative than others.
5. Understanding of absolutes:
  - a. All moral norms are binding, just some more weighty than others. In any situation we are called to choose the greatest, most important, or “highest ranking” good. For the Hebrew midwives, protecting life and aligning with the Hebrews was the greater good, over against being entirely truthful.
  - b. You cannot be held accountable for violating a moral norm/absolute, if the situation demanded you uphold a more important one.

**B. Arguments in Support**

1. It seems to accord with our experience in life that sometimes moral norms do conflict.
2. A basic ethical principle is that moral responsibility requires freedom of action. No one can be held accountable for failing to do what could not be done.
  - a. For example, we are not held accountable for saving lives of all people, or

feeding all hungry. We have no power to do so. However, we are responsible for helping, feeding, and bringing life to those close to us. Ethical responsibility is dependent upon ability to do good.

- b. When placed in a moral dilemma, our ability to abide by one or more moral norms may be restricted or even negated. In such cases, we cannot be held responsible for doing that which we could not do; that is, keeping all moral norms.
  - c. Following the moral norm which has a higher obligation absolves a person of responsibility, and culpability, related to the lower norm.
3. Jesus' teaching and speech indicate a hierarchy of moral norms.
- a. John 19:11; "Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."
  - b. Matthew 5:19; "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven..."
  - c. Matthew 23:23; "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law..."
  - d. Matthew 22:34-40; "...This is the great and first commandment..."
  - e. Matthew 22:21; "Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."
4. God desires some kinds of faithfulness more than others.
- a. Hosea 6:6; "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."
  - b. It is not that God does not want His people to worship properly. He clearly does throughout Scripture. Rather, He is far more concerned with heart attitude and a disposition of mercy than he is with proper worship protocol.
5. There are degrees of punishment and reward which correspond to greater sin/good. If there is greater sin or good, and greater punishment and reward, then there must be some absolutes and moral norms that are more important than others.
- a. Matthew 11:20-24; "...But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."
  - b. Matthew 10:14-15; "And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."
  - c. Luke 20:46-47; "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."
  - d. Matthew 25:14-30
  - e. 1 Corinthians 3:13-15
  - f. 2 John 1:8; "Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward."

## **VI. Discussion Question**

Which one of these positions most appeals to you? Which do you believe to be most in line with Scriptural thought? Why?