

CBC Sunday School
Christian Ethics: Relativism
November 14, 2021

“Relativism about truth does not lead to tolerance. Rather, it leads to the conclusion that social conflicts cannot be resolved by reason or even compromise, because there is no common reason that can unite groups that differ on fundamental questions.” Philip Johnson

I. Discussion Question – Moral Dilemma Hypothetical

Imagine you are a Christian living in Nazi Germany. You believe wholeheartedly in all of God’s Word and His moral commands. Out of love for neighbor, you are helping your Jewish neighbors hide in your home. SS officers knock on your door and ask if you are harboring Jewish people. How do you respond, as a Christian who values life, love, and integrity?

II. Introductory Thoughts on Ethics

A. Defining Ethics

1. “Normative ethics proper seeks to formulate and defend basic moral principles, rules, systems, and virtues which serve as guides for what actions ought or ought not to be taken, what motives ought or ought not to be embraced, and what kinds of persons we ought or ought not to be.” (Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations...*, p. 397)
2. Our ethical system determines how we make choices. Our ethical system is comprised of our beliefs, principles, priorities, values, moral convictions, etc, and guides our decision-making such that we act in accordance with these ideals.

B. The Need for Ethics

1. Even if we all look at the same Scriptures and hold to the same essential beliefs, we all act differently in different situations, often surprisingly so. As Christians devoted to the same Bible, we still tend to prioritize different truths in that Bible. Ethics can help explain why we prioritize certain convictions or truth, and why we make the decisions we make.
2. Consider politics. Why do Christians, all looking at the same Bible, come to such wildly different conclusions as to how we should apply biblical truths?
3. Ethics determine criteria for judging actions to be good or bad, right or wrong.

III. What Is Relativism?

- A. Follows from postmodern thinking. Postmodernism generally is the denial that we can have objective or absolute truth. Postmodern denies certainty. And, according to postmodernism, religious beliefs and ideologies are held by personal preference.
1. Premodernism – Creation to mid-1600s: Source of truth and certainty is revelation, revealed by the gods and/or creation.
 2. Modernism – Mid-1600s to late 1900s: Source of truth and certainty is reason and observation. We know by what we can see and touch. The source of truth and reality is not in God/gods, which are unknowable, but in fact and reason.

3. Postmodernism – Late 1900s to present: No certainty of truth, and the source of truth is relative. The source of truth and reality is not in fact or reason, which is unknowable, but in the self. Its development is based on a few key thinkers, such as;
 - a. Rene Descartes – “I think therefore I am.” Reality founded not externally, but internally. We know universal reality exists because we know we exist.
 - b. David Hume – No theory of reality is possible; we have no true, objective knowledge outside of personal experience.
 - c. Immanuel Kant – All universal laws and principles, which are true and valid, rest on the foundation of human autonomy, understanding, and reason.

- B. All ethical systems appeal to an authority for judging right and wrong. In relativist ethics, the authority is found not in an absolute norm, but in a community or culture, or even the self, all of which may change over time. Relativism finds its authority in what is mutually agreed upon at the time. If “we” all agree it an action or thought is right, then it is right.

- C. Ethical relativism denies absolute norms and truths. Alternatively, it teaches that everyone ought to act in accordance with societal code.

- D. “Ethical relativism: The non-Christian view that no ethical standards are universally applicable and without exception.” John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, p. 752

IV. Is there Biblical Support for Relativism?

- A. Some principles and laws in Scripture are clearly contextually determined and applied. For example, consider the Old Covenant laws that are fulfilled in Christ, and no longer binding on Christians.
 1. Matthew 5:17-18 – ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.
 2. 1 Corinthians 9:19-21 – ¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.
 3. Galatians 3:23-26 – ²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.
 4. Romans 10:4 – ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.
 5. Hebrews 10:1 – ¹ For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities...

B. There seem to be some places in Scripture where universal laws are not normative, but we are instead called to act according to personal preference, or even the variable preferences and sensitivities of others.

1. Romans 14:5 – ⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.
2. Romans 14:20-23 – ²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.
3. 1 Corinthians 8:8-13 – ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.
4. 1 Corinthians 10:24-33 – ²⁴ Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. ²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁶ For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." ²⁷ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— ²⁹ I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? ³⁰ If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? ³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

C. It seems there are some matters of application of God's commands wherein personal perspectives and communal norms may dictate what is obedient or morally good. What is right depends on the situation and perspective of the individual.

D. In such cases, it does not mean that we soften the universal principles of God's commands. On the contrary, we are advised to do what is right, relative to others, in order to uphold a more clear, universal command. Thus, we must better understand what are the universal, non-bending principles of God's commands, so that we may uphold them while we exercise freedom in the areas that God has given us greater latitude. We can better follow God in gray areas when we are clear on that which is black and white.

- E. While the commands of God are universal and transcendent, our interpretations of them may not be. In other words, God's Word is inerrant; our interpretation and application is not. The benefit of relativism is that it acknowledges the reality that truth may be shaped by our perspective. The fault in relativism is that it asserts that truth itself is not absolute.

V. The Weakness in Relativism

- A. Personal experience and perception are to be submitted to the transcendent truths of God, and we are to live for God, not according to human reception. See Galatians 1:6-10.
- B. Which culture or person determines the ethical norm? Different cultures have wildly different views on basic matters of life. As cultures increasingly blend and communicate, who is right? Whose ethics win, and on what basis? More than that, communal ethics shift over time. Why are the ethical priorities of one age superior to another?
- C. In a postmodern world, how can we judge anything as right or wrong? On what basis do we judge? Some would then say we should not judge at all. But we know from basic human experience that we can and must. All have some moral code to which they adhere (and expect others to follow).
- D. Consider: If one culture values suicidal/martyr violence for the sake of worship to their god, on what basis can we judge them, according to ethical relativism? They are only adhering to their cultural norms. They may even be doing "good" in the eyes of their own culture. Alternatively, someone like Rosa Parks went against cultural norms. On what basis could we laud her?
- E. The assertion that there is no such thing as absolute truth is self-defeating.
- F. Scripture and the existence of God. If Scripture is true and God exists, then so do moral norms that transcend time and space and culture.
- G. Even non-believing Gentiles, who do not recognize God's transcendent commands, have a normative law that binds them, and for which they will be held accountable in the end.
 - 1. Romans 2:14-16 – ¹⁴For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

VI. Discussion: Relativism Applied

Can you think of examples in life and/or Scripture in which our ethics are relatively determined (i.e. where we have true Christian freedom)? In those circumstances, what universal principles must guide us, if any?