

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 10

The Existential Perspective:
Choosing Good

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever thought about all the excuses people have for not doing the right thing? When children don't do their homework, or employees don't do their jobs, or friends don't keep their promises, what do they say? Maybe they lacked the information they needed, so their excuse is, "I didn't know." Or maybe they didn't understand the information they had, so they say, "I didn't know I was supposed to do it." Or maybe they simply preferred doing the wrong thing, so they admit, "I didn't want to do it." Well, the fact is that in order to do the right thing in the end, we ordinarily have to do many other things along the way. We have to get the right information, we have to assess it correctly, and we have to apply it in the right way.

This is the tenth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*. And we've entitled this lesson "The Existential Perspective: Choosing Good." In this lesson, we'll explore how Christians actually make ethical decisions — how we go about choosing good — and we'll pay particular attention to the ways our personal abilities and capacities contribute to these choices. Throughout these lessons, we've been teaching that ethical judgment involves:

the application of God's Word to a situation by a person

And we've been highlighting three elements of this model: God's Word, the situation, and the person. When we approach ethics with a focus on God's Word, we're using the normative perspective. And when we pay attention to circumstances, such as facts, goals and means, we're employing the situational perspective. Finally, when we concentrate on the persons involved in making ethical decisions, we're looking at matters from the existential perspective. Each of these perspectives contributes to ethical choices by giving us information about God, about our situation, and about ourselves. And all of them are interrelated. In this lesson, we'll look once again at the existential perspective. And this time, we'll focus on the ways we use our personal faculties in the process of choosing good.

Human beings use a variety of capacities and abilities to make ethical decisions. For our purposes, we'll refer to these abilities as our "existential faculties." We can describe these faculties in many ways, but we'll summarize them in terms of seven capacities and abilities: experience, imagination, reason, conscience, emotions, heart and will. Now, there's a great deal of overlap between these existential faculties. They're all deeply interrelated and interdependent. Even so, each one functions in its own way, so it's helpful to look at the main roles each faculty plays in ethics.

In this lesson, we'll group these existential faculties according to the ways they ordinarily help us make ethical judgments. These groupings are somewhat artificial, because all of our abilities and capacities are at work in every step along the way. But it's

also true that we rely primarily on certain faculties to perform certain tasks. So, these divisions can be helpful as we think about the process of making ethical choices.

As we explore the concept of choosing good, we'll group our existential faculties under three main stages of the decision-making process. First, we'll look at the main faculties we use when we're acquiring knowledge of our situation, ourselves and God's Word. Second, we'll consider the faculties we typically use in assessing or evaluating this knowledge. And third, we'll focus on the faculties we use when we're applying our knowledge by making ethical choices. Let's begin with the main faculties we employ when we're acquiring knowledge.

ACQUIRING

We'll consider two of the most basic faculties that are critical to acquiring knowledge: first, we'll consider how we rely on experience. And second, we'll look at the ways our imagination contributes to our knowledge. Let's begin with the ways experience helps us acquire the knowledge we need to make ethical decisions.

EXPERIENCE

The human experience is a tool in the hand of God. He created the human experience. It is part of how he also teaches us when we apply it rightly... We learn from our experiences. We learn from the things that we've done wrong and the consequences that we've had to engage. We learn from the testimony of others as to how the Lord has utilized them or blessed them or guided them. We learn from how we have seen the application of Scripture move through the lives of other individuals, transforming their lives. Those things inform us on how we are to make ethical decisions. They help us understand how Scripture applies and is actually, for lack of a better word, "put to use" in the life of an individual.

— Dr. John Norwood

As obvious as it may seem, it's very important to remember in the study of ethics that human beings gain knowledge through many different types of experiences. We know people because we have the experience of seeing them, talking to them, and so on. We know emotions because we have experienced things like fear, love and anger. We know about some events directly because we live through them, experiencing them firsthand. We know about other events indirectly because we have had the experience of reading about them, or of learning about them through some other medium. As we speak of experience in this lesson, we'll have these and other kinds of experiences in mind. To help us summarize all these different types of experiences, we'll define experience as:

awareness of or interaction with persons, things and events

Each experience produces knowledge of some type, whether about God, the world around us, or ourselves. And this knowledge helps us discern good from evil.

As we consider experience in more detail, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll focus on our physical or sensory interaction with the world. And second, we'll address our mental experiences, those experiences we have in our minds. Let's begin with our physical interaction with the world around us.

Physical

Our physical interaction with the world takes place through our sensory perception — our sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. These five senses represent the primary ways we gain information about God, people, objects, our environment, and the many events that occur. For instance, we know about other people because we see them, talk to them, and touch them. We learn about events as we witness them, read about them, or hear reports about them. We learn about God's glory by reading his Word, listening to others talk about him, and observing the grandeur of his creation. Of course, Scripture sometimes calls attention to the limitations of our senses. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:7, Paul wrote:

We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

As Paul indicated here, our senses are limited in their ability to give us knowledge about the future of our salvation. Yes, we use our sight to read God's Word, but it takes something more than sensory perception for us to be convinced that God's Word is true. It takes faith, belief in things that are beyond direct sensory experience.

The reason that we live by faith and not by sight is because we don't see Jesus now. We long for that day, but we don't see him in the flesh. He is sitting at the Father's right hand. We live as the people in a time in between, between our salvation, between Christ ascending to make all things new, and his return and the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. And since we live in the time in between, it is difficult for us not to fall away... To live by faith, not by sight says, "I will trust. I will trust Jesus that he is good, that he is faithful, though I do not see him."

— Rev. Cameron Shaffer

But apart from these limitations, God has given us our senses as important tools for gaining knowledge. As a result, our senses tend to be reliable, teaching us true things about God, the creation around us, and ourselves. Now, we need to be aware that humanity's fall into sin has affected our sensory perceptions. Not only do our illnesses and other abnormalities limit our physical abilities, but at times we also encounter

illusions. Sometimes we think we hear, see, or feel something that isn't really there. But in general, our senses are reliable. Consider John's words in 1 John 1:1-3:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

John spoke of hearing, sight, and touch as reliable senses that gave him and others true knowledge about Jesus. In the same way, those who read John's words use their senses to perceive his testimony, so that they too can have knowledge of the truth. In a similar way, Psalm 34:8 encourages us with these words:

Taste and see that the Lord is good! (Psalm 34:8).

As David taught here, the fact that we have food to eat is proof that God is good. It teaches us that he loves us and provides for us. And although we cannot see God physically, our awareness of his goodness can metaphorically be described as seeing, since it gives us knowledge about him. So, both our sense of taste and our experience of eating give us true knowledge about God.

It is also through our senses that we learn about God's norms as they are revealed through special and general revelation. It is through our physical senses that we learn about the many facts, goals and means of our situations. And it is through our senses that we learn much about ourselves. Yes, we need to be careful to use our senses rightly. And we need to use the Scriptures and our other faculties to confirm the knowledge we gain through our senses. But we must also recognize that our senses are generally reliable, God-given tools, and that the knowledge we gain through them is critical for Christian ethics.

Having considered physical interaction with the world as an important part of our experience, we're ready to speak of our mental experiences.

Mental

Our physical senses provide us with information, but until that information enters our internal thought processes, our experiences do not result in knowledge. Now, throughout history, the relationship between sense perceptions and mental concepts has been understood in many different ways. But for our purposes, we'll illustrate the connection in a very simple way.

Consider the experience of seeing a cow. When we see the cow, our eye sends an image of it to our brain. This is the physical sensory experience of sight. But the experience of knowing that the animal is a cow is mental. Our eyes do not tell our mind

that the image is a cow. On the contrary, it is our mind that interprets the image as a cow. Only when our mind has experienced the image of a cow does our sight result in knowledge. In a similar way, all of our mental experiences are vital to gaining knowledge. Self-reflection, introspection, emotions, memories, imaginings, plans for the future, wrestling with problems, awareness of God, conviction of sin — these are all internal activities that we experience.

Now, just like our physical experience, our mental experience is affected by sin. Sometimes we make mistakes in our thinking, or believe we have experienced things that haven't really happened. So, we need to be careful to confirm our experiences with Scripture and our other faculties. But we must also recognize that the Holy Spirit uses our mental experiences to teach us true knowledge. When we think of our mental experiences in this way, it's easy to see that the whole process of gaining knowledge can be assessed from the perspective of our mental experience. Whether our knowledge comes from reading books or from observing events, it ultimately resides in our minds. And for this reason, mental experience is critical for gaining and processing knowledge.

With this understanding of experience in mind, we're ready to turn to the second existential faculty we use to acquire knowledge: imagination. Imagination is sometimes thought to be an illegitimate way to pursue knowledge, as if it necessarily entails falsehood or even deceit. But as we'll see, the Bible has many positive uses for imagination.

IMAGINATION

In this lesson, we'll use the term imagination simply to refer to our:

ability to form mental images of things that are beyond our experience

At first glance, it may seem strange to think of imagination as a way of acquiring ethical knowledge. But as we'll see, our imaginative abilities are vital to learning and thinking about God, the world, and ourselves.

Imagination, which each one of us has — the capacity to think, to imagine, to picture things — is a vital, God-given part of our humanity. And when you tell a Bible story it's so much better if you say, "Imagine Jesus on a hill, and there are three crosses there, and you can see Jesus is on the central cross" and you've got a picture in your mind, and people interact, and they remember that so much better. And I think engaging people's imagination is perhaps one of the key things because you don't have to be brilliantly intelligent or very academic. Everybody's got an imagination.

— Dr. Peter Walker

We'll explore the concept of imagination in three ways: first, we'll speak of imagination as a form of creativity. Second, we'll consider how imagination enables us to think about subjects that exist in different periods of time. And third, we'll look at how imagination allows us to think about things that are separated from us by physical distance. We'll begin with the idea that imagination is a form of creativity.

Creativity

A typical way to think about imagination as creativity is to consider the steps taken by artists when drawing pictures. They often begin by conceptualizing the drawings, by forming mental images of what the finished drawings will look like. When they begin to draw, they imagine the result of each stroke before it's made. If the stroke matches what they had in mind, they're often pleased. But if it doesn't match, they may alter what they've drawn. This process of imagining and painting continues until the work is completed.

In a similar way, imagination is involved in *everything* we make or create. We use our imaginations every day for simple acts of creativity, such as deciding what kind of food we'll cook, or even deciding what to say in a conversation. And we use our imaginations in many other creative ways as well. Scientists use their imaginations to come up with theories and ways of testing their theories. Inventors use their imaginations to create new technologies and devices. Architects use their imaginations to design buildings and bridges. And teachers and preachers use their imaginations as they write lessons and sermons. Consider the way the prophet Nathan called on David to use his imagination in 2 Samuel 12:1-7:

Nathan ... said to [David], "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor... [T]he poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb ... And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him... [T]he rich man ... took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the [guest] who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die" ... Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:1-7).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Nathan created an imaginary ethical situation, an imaginary legal case. And he asked David to draw a moral conclusion from this imaginary situation. The success of Nathan's confrontation relied on his and David's ability to imagine creatively.

As this biblical example illustrates, imagination enables us to form and to recognize moral patterns and analogies. For instance, as we look through Scripture, we find many specific examples of things that God has blessed and cursed. We also find many general principles that explain how God determines what to bless and what to curse. And understanding how these general principles relate to the specific examples is, to some degree, a matter of creative imagination. We create connections between the

principles and examples, and we test these connections by imagining counter-examples. Then we imagine consistent ways to apply the same principles in our own lives.

Of course, once again, we must remember that the corruption of sin can cause us to imagine all sorts of errors. So, we have to use our other faculties to make sure that the conclusions of our imagination agree with God's Word. But we can still have a good degree of confidence in our imagination when we use it carefully and rightly. After all, the Holy Spirit gave us this faculty as a reliable tool for assessing ethical knowledge.

The Lord has given us the ability, because we're created in his image, to project, to think forward, and we can actually use our imagination to think of the consequences that disobedience could bring upon our life, or obedience could bring upon our life. And that is encouraged in the Scripture. In Proverbs 6, Solomon paints a picture which draws his son and the reader into using their imagination to think about the nature of the adulteress woman and then shows the consequences of following after such behavior. In the same way, the Lord tells us of the nature of heaven, and we can only imagine, so to speak, of what heaven will be like, but the blessings of being there certainly draw us toward obedience.

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

In addition to using imagination for creativity, we can also use it to help us think about things that are separated from us by time, things that do not exist at the moment we are thinking about them.

Time

Consider Jesus, for instance. He's no longer on earth teaching his twelve disciples. He's no longer dying on the cross, or rising from the dead, or ascending into heaven. So, in order to understand and apply Jesus' ministry to our ethical decisions, we have to use our ability to imagine the past. Or consider how the Bible requires us to pursue the goal of God's glorification through the triumph of his kingdom. But this goal is in the future. We have to imagine it in order to pursue it. And we also have to use our imaginations to figure out the best means to use to reach this goal. In short, without our ability to imagine the past and the future, we would not be able to apply God's Word to our lives.

Having looked at imagination in terms of creativity and time, we should turn to the way imagination helps us to think about things that are separated from us by physical distance.

Distance

For instance, very few of us have visited the island of Malta where the apostle Paul was shipwrecked on his journey to Rome. But the fact that we've never seen the

island for ourselves doesn't mean that we can't imagine it. In fact, to some degree, when we read the biblical account of Paul's time on Malta in the book of Acts, we can't avoid imagining it.

You see, when people and things are so distant from us that they are beyond the range of our senses, we have to use our imaginations to think about them. Of course, the information we receive about these distant things is fallible, and so are our thoughts about them. Therefore, we need to rely strongly on the Holy Spirit. He helps us evaluate our imagination according to God's Word, and to harmonize it with our other abilities and capacities. So, when used rightly, our imagination is extremely useful for thinking about things that are distant from us.

Consider the case of the apostle Paul during one of his periods of imprisonment. According to Philippians 2:25 and 4:18, when the Philippian church heard that Paul was in prison and in need, they sent a minister to take care of him and a monetary gift to support him. This was a good ethical choice. It took account of the facts, set a godly goal, and then devised the means to reach that goal.

But notice how greatly this process relied on imagination to span the distance between Paul and the Philippians. Paul was not present to the Philippians' experience, so they used their imagination to understand the facts of Paul's situation. Then they used their imagination to set the goal of changing Paul's circumstances in his distant prison. Finally, they imagined the means that would enable them to bridge the distance between themselves and Paul in order to reach their goal. In each step of this process, imagination enabled the Philippians to think about things that existed at some distance beyond their own physical experience.

By now, it should be clear that the process of acquiring knowledge relies heavily on experience and imagination. Whether we're investigating the ethical dimensions of God's Word, our situation, or even ourselves, we usually gain our knowledge through these existential faculties.

Now that we've considered acquiring knowledge in the process of choosing good, we're ready to turn to assessing the knowledge that we've received.

ASSESSING

We'll speak about some of the ways we assess knowledge by considering three existential faculties. First, we'll mention reason or intellect. Second, we'll address our conscience. And third, we'll focus on our emotions. Let's begin with reason.

REASON

For our purposes, reason can be defined as:

the capacity to make logical inferences and to judge logical consistency

In a Christian context, right reasoning is the ability to think in coherent and orderly ways and to make judgments that accord with biblical patterns of thought.

Unfortunately, Christians often go to extremes when they think about the role of reason in ethics. On the one side, some theological traditions give reason more attention than any of our other existential faculties. These theologians sometimes speak of the “primacy of the intellect,” as if our reason were to be trusted above all other abilities and capacities. But we must always remember that to use reason rightly, we have to employ it in harmony with our other faculties. On the other side, some traditions go to the opposite extreme, at times even seeing reason as an enemy, as if using human intellect were to ignore the personal leading of the Holy Spirit. But the truth is that our intellect comes from God, and that the Holy Spirit helps us use it rightly. Therefore, it has an important role to play in our decision-making process.

Reason comes into play in many areas of the study of Christian ethics. But at this point in our lesson, we’re most interested in how it enables us to make sense of our situation. Reason helps us both to understand the facts and to compare these facts to the norms revealed in God’s Word. As we’ve already seen, on a basic level, even the knowledge we acquire through our sensory experience requires a measure of reasoning.

Think once again about the way our eye sends the image of the cow to our brain. The brain records the image, but it’s our reason that recognizes the image as a cow. We assess the visible qualities of the image, compare the image to our existing knowledge, and determine that the image is a cow. This basic level of knowledge involves reason.

On a more complex level, reason permits us to compare different facts to each other to determine their logical relations. For instance, let’s consider a very simple illustration of reasoning about two facts. On the one hand, we have the statement “David is sick.” And on the other hand, we have the statement “God can heal the sick.” The first statement declares the fact of David’s poor health, and the second statement declares the fact of God’s ability. Reason tells us that David’s sickness is a specific type of sickness, but whatever it is, it’s included in the broader category of sickness that God can heal. This allows us to draw a conclusion that is implied, but not stated, in the initial fact: God can heal David. When we’re making biblical decisions, we must apply similar reasoning to the facts of our own situation, determining how they relate to one another.

Reason also helps us relate statements of fact to statements of duty. In this process we compare the facts of our situation to the requirements of God’s norms. Consider the statements “David is sick” and “We should pray for the sick.” “David is sick” is still a statement of fact, but “We should pray for the sick” is a statement of duty. It tells us what God requires of us. When we use moral reasoning to assess these statements, we can derive a specific ethical conclusion: We should pray for David.

Of course, there are many other ways we use reason in ethics. We use it when we argue from the lesser to the greater, as Jesus did in Matthew 6. There, he taught that since God feeds the birds, which have little value, he will also feed his people, who have great value. We also use reason to talk about events that are conditional, such as when God flooded the earth because humanity’s sinful actions met the conditions necessary for its destruction. The list could go on and on.

Sadly, Christians sometimes believe that the Bible teaches us not to use reason in ethics. They think that, somehow, we are to turn off our logical capacities when we obey God. But nothing could be further from the truth. Scripture uses reason all the time, and it

regularly calls on us to do the same. It constantly presents logical moral arguments. And because the Bible is infallible, its logic is a perfect model for our own ethical reasoning.

Of course, we also need to remember that sin's corrupting influence has also reached our ability to reason. As a result, fallen human reason can never be as perfect as the reasoning we find in Scripture. So, to assure that we use reason in ways that please God, we should always confirm our conclusions with our other faculties, with other people, and especially with God's Word. Moreover, as we said earlier, we must rely on the power and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit throughout this process. When used correctly, reason is a very helpful tool for assessing the knowledge we've acquired.

With this understanding of reason in mind, we're ready to discuss the ways our conscience enables us to assess our ethical knowledge.

CONSCIENCE

For our purposes in this lesson, we'll define conscience as our:

God-given ability to discern good and evil

It is the sense of conviction that our thoughts, words and deeds are either pleasing or offensive to God. Listen to the way 2 Corinthians 1:12 reveals Paul's reliance on his conscience:

Our conscience [testifies] that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you (2 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul and Timothy were convinced that they had behaved in ways that God approved. Their conscience approved their actions. In this case, their conscience gave them true affirmation that their behavior was pleasing to God. In other cases, when we've sinned, our conscience can rightly condemn us as guilty and encourage us to repent. For instance, when King David sinfully took the census of his fighting men, his conscience condemned his actions and moved him to repent. Listen to the record of this event in 2 Samuel 24:10:

David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly" (2 Samuel 24:10).

Here, the word "heart" translates the Hebrew word *lev* (לֵב). And in this case, it refers to the concept of conscience — David's ability to distinguish good from evil. In this sense, conscience enables us to assess the knowledge we have acquired, and to judge it against the standard of God's Word. It approves us when we believe we are acting in

accord with God's Word, and it condemns us when we believe we are violating God's Word.

Humanity has been endowed with wonderful things that God gave us. He gave us a responsibility, but he also gave us a conscience so that when we do something that really hurts somebody else, we can feel bad about it. And that's so wonderful of our conscience, that it help[s] us to feel bad, because that become[s] a force in us to change things, not to do it again, or to go back to somebody and to ask forgiveness. If there was not that faculty of feeling bad, how would you ask forgiveness to others or to God? And how could you get back to somebody and get the relationship intact again?

— Rev. Dr. Henk Stoker

Like all our other existential abilities and capacities, our conscience has been corrupted by sin. Therefore, it's bound to make mistakes from time to time. It errs by approving something that is actually sinful, or by condemning something that is actually good. In either case, the result is that we misunderstand what God would have us do. For instance, listen to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8:8-11:

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you ... eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed (1 Corinthians 8:8-11).

Paul taught that it was acceptable for believers with strong, well-informed consciences to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. But if they had weak consciences, and mistakenly believed that it was wrong to eat idol food, then it became sinful for them to eat it. And the reverse is also true. It is sinful to do things that God prohibits, even if our consciences say that these things are good. Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 4:4:

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Corinthians 4:4, NIV).

Paul's conscience was clear because he believed that he had done the right thing. But he knew that having a clear or good conscience was not enough, because our consciences can make mistakes.

Not surprisingly, the solution to sin's corrupting influence is to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit who works within us as we strive to conform our conscience to God's Word. As he helps us harmonize our existential faculties, we can correct our conscience when it falls into error and affirm it when it judges rightly.

Now that we've spoken about reason and conscience, we're ready to focus on the ways we use our emotions in assessing knowledge.

EMOTIONS

Unfortunately, many Christians believe that emotions should have nothing to do with making biblical decisions, but as we'll see, the Scriptures insist that emotions have a very important role to play.

In our modern world we often hear people making ethical decisions based upon how they feel. And so it's normal for Christians to react to that kind of emphasis on the subjective or the emotional side of ethics by turning to the Bible and treating it like it's a rational rule book. Well, that is an overreaction to the subjectivity of ethics in our day, the emphasis on the emotions. Because the apostle Paul deals with this in a striking way in the book of Galatians. In chapter 5 he says, "If we live by the Spirit ... then we must keep in step with the Spirit," that is, make choices that keep us aligned with Holy Spirit. We might say, "Well, of course what he means is learn the rules, follow the rules and you're keeping in step with the Spirit." But it's not quite that simple because the verses that come just before are very familiar to us, Galatians 5:22-23, and they are the verses that speak of the fruit of the Spirit. You remember how the apostle Paul puts it? He says that "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Those kinds of words are highly emotional words, which lets us know that making good, proper biblical decisions in the Christian life involves, it must involve, our emotions. Because as the apostle says, if we have those fruit of the Spirit, those highly emotional fruit of the Spirit, "against such things there is no law." If you follow them, if you have Holy Spirit working in you in these ways, then you will not violate the laws of God. And that, of course, is what we want to do when we make biblical decisions.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Emotions are:

inner feelings; the affective aspects of our ethical sensitivity

They are God-given human abilities that can help us assess knowledge.

The Bible doesn't tend to speak about emotions abstractly or as a group. Rather, it talks a great deal about individual emotions, such as love, hate, anger, fear, joy, sorrow, anxiety, contentment, and so on. So, rather than considering emotions as a whole, we'll

use just a few examples of particular emotions to illustrate how emotions help us interpret the world around us. As we're about to see, emotions enable us to assess knowledge in many different ways.

For instance, we often have emotional responses to situations even before we engage in any conscious, rational reflection. In these cases, our emotions provide our initial orientation toward the facts. They are immediate assessments of our circumstances. As one example, if we're crossing the street and hear a loud car horn behind us, our first response will probably be an emotional one, like fear or surprise. Only after conscious reflection will we be able to explain that we were afraid because we felt we might be in danger.

In cases like this, it's possible to say that emotions are based on some subconscious form of reasoning: we know that car horns often alert us to danger, so when we hear a horn, we react with the emotion of fear. But it's hard to identify any thoughtful, rational process in such a reflex. To all appearances, it happens too quickly for us to engage in any active, conscious reasoning. Instead, it appears that emotion is our first reaction to the experience, and that our thoughtful consideration of the event comes later.

The same thing is true in many other ethical situations. Our emotions are often our initial interpretation of the facts. Listen to the record of Daniel's encounter with an angel in Daniel 10:8-17:

I was left alone and saw this great vision, and no strength was left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength... I said to him who stood before me, "O my lord, by reason of the vision pains have come upon me, and I retain no strength. How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me" (Daniel 10:8-17).

The shock, terror and anguish of seeing this heavenly being paralyzed Daniel with fear. He felt his emotions intensely before he was able to think rationally about the vision. And his powerful emotional experience influenced his response to the vision, motivating him to submit to the angel's message from God.

Emotions also aid us in assessing knowledge by helping us see the facts of our situations more clearly. Think again about the way King David responded to the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then had her husband Uriah killed to cover up the adultery. But he'd never felt sorrow and contrition over his sin, and so he'd never repented. His lack of these emotions prevented him from thinking rightly about his sin, blinding him to its severity, and thereby keeping him from repenting.

In response to David's hard-heartedness, God sent Nathan to tell David a parable about a rich man who had stolen a poor man's pet sheep and fed it to his guest. David, of course, had been a shepherd himself, and this story stirred his emotions. His emotions enabled him to see the injustice in the situation, and he was outraged by the rich man's lack of pity. Then Nathan revealed the truth: the parable was a metaphor of David's own actions. David was the rich man who had stolen Bathsheba from poor Uriah. David had known the *facts* of his actions for a long time. But he was able to see his sin clearly only when he used his emotions to measure these facts against God's standard.

Our emotions can be very useful tools for determining how God's Word applies to our modern lives. Feelings of compassion can help us see the importance of helping those in need. The stirring of anger can persuade us of the value of pursuing justice. Experiences of joy can enable us to see and affirm God's goodness even in the midst of difficult times. Fear can cause us to search for ways to avoid sin. Feelings of guilt can alert us to times we've fallen into sin. Feelings of love can teach us how to provide, and protect, and admonish, and show mercy.

Of course, like the rest of our existential faculties, our emotions are corrupted by sin and, therefore, subject to error. This is why we should counsel people not to follow their emotions blindly, without reflection. Not every feeling we have is righteous, or even accurate. Our emotions reveal the whole range of our hearts, including our sins and misunderstandings. So, we must always be careful to submit them to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to the guidance of God's Word. And we must always harmonize them with our other God-given abilities and capacities.

Whenever we think about how facts relate to one another or about how they relate to our duty before God, we're assessing the knowledge we've acquired. And in these assessments, reason, conscience and emotions are all valuable tools that can help us reach conclusions that are pleasing to God.

So far in our investigation of choosing good, we've looked at some of the existential faculties we rely on most when we're acquiring knowledge about our situation. We've also considered the main faculties we rely on when we're assessing this knowledge. Now we're ready to turn to the third step: applying knowledge. In this section, we'll focus on the abilities and capacities most directly related to the act of deciding.

APPLYING

Once we rightly understand ourselves, our situation and God's Word, we are finally in a position to make an ethical decision. It is not enough simply to figure out what we ought to do. We actually have to decide to do it. We have to make a conscious choice to do the right thing, and we have to follow through with that choice. And that's what we have in mind here when we talk about applying knowledge; we are talking about decisions that result in action.

Our discussion of applying knowledge will focus on two faculties. First, we'll speak of the more general faculty of the heart. And second, we'll consider the more specific faculty of the will. Let's begin with the heart.

HEART

As we saw in a prior lesson, our heart is the center of our entire being. It's the depth of our inner person and the seat of our motives — the sum of all of our inward dispositions. In the vocabulary of the Bible, there's a great deal of overlap between the

words “heart,” “mind,” “thoughts,” “spirit” and “soul.” But in this lesson, we want to focus on the heart’s function in the decision-making process. For our purposes, we’ll define the heart as the:

seat of moral knowledge and moral will

The heart is our whole inner person considered from the perspective of what we know, and what we do with our knowledge.

We’ll look at two aspects of the heart in order to see how it functions when we make ethical decisions. First, we’ll investigate our heart’s commitments, our basic loyalties. And second, we’ll explore our heart’s desires, those things we want when we make a decision. We’ll begin with the commitments of our hearts.

Commitments

We have many commitments in life. We’re loyal to various people, such as our families, friends, coworkers, and fellow Christians. We’re committed to organizations, such as churches, schools, companies, governments, and even sports teams. We’re committed to principles, such as goodness, honesty, truth, beauty and wisdom. We’re loyal to certain lifestyles, certain patterns of behavior, and preferences for all kinds of things. And, as strange as it may sound, because we’re fallen human beings, there’s a sense in which we even have commitments to sin.

Now, of course, we’re not committed to all of these things to the same degree. And for the Christian, one commitment should always stand above all others: our commitment to God. This commitment should govern the fundamental direction of our entire life, and all our other commitments should serve this most basic one. As Solomon proclaimed in 1 Kings 8:61:

May your hearts be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands (1 Kings 8:61, NIV).

And as the prophet Hanani taught in 2 Chronicles 16:9:

The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him (2 Chronicles 16:9, NIV).

Commitments are important in ethics because there’s a sense in which they govern all of our choices. To be more specific, we choose according to the commitments we feel most greatly at the moment that we make our choices. When our *righteous* commitments are the strongest, we act according to our heartfelt loyalty to God, and he judges our behavior to be good. But when we give in to our *sinful* commitments, God judges our behavior to be evil. As Jesus said in Luke 6:45:

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).

Here, Jesus referred to our commitments as the things that are stored up in our hearts. And our commitments always express themselves in our works. So, we express our commitment to God in good works, and we express our commitment to sin in evil works.

One of the things that Jesus routinely would chastise the religious leaders of his day was that they were very faithful in obeying the laws outwardly... But Jesus saw through that, and he knew that that was only something they were doing outwardly. And that's not what pleases the Lord. What pleases God is when our heart is striving after obedience and striving after serving God sincerely and with a pure heart. And so, it is important for us to always focus on the inward being and let the fruit come out as a result, rather than just focusing on the external.

— Dr. Steve Curtis

Because sin still dwells in us, every Christian has mixed commitments. Some of our commitments are good, being part of our larger commitment to God. But some of our commitments are evil, being the result of the sin in our hearts. So, as we work toward making biblical decisions, we have to be very aware of our commitments. We submit to the Holy Spirit as he works within us to conform all of our commitments to God's character, both through our understanding of his Word, and through the input of our other faculties. And we must reject and attempt to change those commitments that flow from sin.

With this understanding of our heart's commitments in mind, we're ready to think about our desires. How do our wants and longings impact our moral choices?

Desires

Scripture indicates that just as Christians have mixed commitments, we also have good and bad desires in our hearts. When we set our hearts on things that God approves, our desires are good. But when we set our hearts on things he condemns, our desires are evil. For instance, in 2 Timothy 2:21-22, Paul gave this instruction:

If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy ... ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (2 Timothy 2:21-22).

Paul taught that we are to purify our hearts by getting rid of our evil desires, our longings that are motivated by indwelling sin. As we purge the evil desires from our hearts, we'll be left with only those desires that please the Lord.

Purifying our hearts is not easy; sin puts up a strong fight. In fact, this battle is so difficult that we can never win it by our own strength. Only by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit can we hope to win this struggle. But because we are imperfect people, we are certain to fail even to rely on the Spirit as we should. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 5:17:

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Galatians 5:17).

And in Romans 7:15-18, he wrote this:

I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... [I]t is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out (Romans 7:15-18).

In these verses, Paul contrasted our good and evil desires. On the one hand, we have spiritual desires, desires that the Holy Spirit gives us and that are pleasing to God. On the other hand, we have sinful desires that come from our fallen, sinful nature. And these two desires battle for dominance every time we make a decision. When we give in to our sinful desires, our choices are evil. But when we resist those sinful desires and act on our spiritual desires, our choices are good. And there is no other option; there are only two kinds of decisions: good and evil. Every good decision is made according to desires from the Holy Spirit, and every evil decision is made according to sinful desires.

We became enslaved to our sinful desiring and our selfish desiring because we turned from God. Losing God's personal presence, we are now incapable of desiring rightly. But when God, by grace, through faith in the life of his Son, through the power of the Spirit, reintroduces the divine life of his Son in us, then we're talking about a different human nature, a restored human nature, redeemed human nature, healed human nature, freed human nature, so that we can learn to desire and have the ability to begin to desire rightly.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

In the Christian life, our greatest desire always should be to please God, to do his will. We hate the fact that we desire sin. Considered from the perspective of our lives as a whole, our sinful choices contradict our desires. We choose to sin even though we don't desire to sin. But considered from the moment of our decision, our choices never contradict our desires. From this perspective, we always choose what we desire most at the moment that we decide. In other words, we choose to sin because we desire to sin. As we read in James 1:14-15:

Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin (James 1:14-15).

When we think about our hearts in terms of our commitments and desires, it is easy to see that the heart is essential for making ethical decisions. Sometimes we follow our good commitments and desires in order to make decisions that rightly apply God's Word to our lives. At other times, we follow our evil commitments and desires, refusing to live by God's Word. In either case, these choices rise from our hearts.

Having spoken of our heart as the more general faculty that we use when applying knowledge, we're ready to look at the will as a narrower, more specific existential faculty for making moral choices.

WILL

Our will is our:

capacity for making decisions

It's our volition, our ability to make choices. So, each time we make a choice or a decision, we're using our will.

Like all our existential faculties, our will is a perspective on our whole person. So, we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that it's in tension with our other capacities and abilities. Rather, to speak of our will is to view our entire decision-making process from the perspective of the choices we make, and especially from the perspective of the final outcome. Of course, making the right choice is often hard because our will is affected by our fallen nature. For the Christian, this means that while the Holy Spirit enables us to make decisions that please God, there's always the possibility that indwelling sin will persuade us to make sinful decisions.

We also need to recognize that our will may be either active or passive. That is to say, sometimes the ethical questions we face require active reflection and conscious decisions. But at other times, we make decisions in a passive, unconscious manner, such as by force of habit or reflex. Consider, for instance, the active way we might use our will if we wake up feeling ill on a work day. We have to make an active, conscious choice either to stay home and take care of our health or to go to work and earn money. We make these kinds of active choices all the time. In fact, we might say that every ethical matter that we recognize as a problem or quandary requires us to use our will in an active manner. This is true simply by virtue of the fact that we recognize it as a problem.

But there are many other ethical issues that we handle in a passive, unconscious manner, such as those that we deal with habitually, on a regular basis. For instance, our will can be fairly passive on ordinary work days. We don't consciously choose whether or not to go to work. We just go. And we generally don't think about the morality of our decision. We simply fall into our habitual pattern.

Our will also functions in a passive, unconscious way when we respond by reflex. Here we have in mind those decisions that seem to come to us without thinking. Often, these decisions are made in the moment. For instance, if we're driving and someone runs out in front of us, we don't consciously think, "Should I or shouldn't I stop for them?" We do everything we can to stop. It's an act of will because it derives from our decision

to recognize that life is valuable. But it's passive because it doesn't involve a conscious evaluation in the moment. In one way or another, either actively or passively, our will is involved in each and every thing we choose to think, say or do. It's the faculty we use to make every decision in our lives. So, if our decisions are to please our Lord, we must submit our will to him at every turn. We must will what God's Word commands, and we must allow the Holy Spirit working within us to influence our will in positive ways. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:13:

It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

In Philippians 2, Paul says that the Holy Spirit is working in us both to will and to do according to his pleasure. And that's actually a beautiful truth of the Christian life, is that, as part of our sanctification, the Holy Spirit is changing our "want to." He's changing our will. The desires of our heart are being conformed to the desires of God. And so, the Holy Spirit is at work in the Christian's life changing our will, our "want to," and as a result of that, changing the way that we behave and the way we live. So, the Holy Spirit is at work as far as what we are willing and what we are doing so that we'll be conformed to the image of Christ.

— Dr. Steve Curtis

Throughout this lesson, we've seen that God has given us many existential faculties that play important roles in choosing good. If we overlook any one of them, we run the risk of not being able to make truly moral decisions. But to make sure that we understand how each of these abilities and capacities functions in harmony with the others, let's consider a time when Jesus exercised all of these existential capacities and abilities to make an ethical decision. In Matthew 12:9-13 we read this account:

[Jesus] went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" — so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other (Matthew 12:9-13).

Let's look at this event in terms of our lesson. First, Jesus acquired knowledge. He used his experience to see and to recognize that the man before him had a shriveled hand. Jesus also used his imagination to set the goal of healing the man's hand, and to consider the various ways he might answer the Pharisees' question. Second, Jesus assessed his knowledge. His reason drew an analogy between the legitimate practice of

rescuing a sheep on the Sabbath and the action he was considering — specifically, healing a man on the Sabbath. His conscience concluded that healing this man would be a good thing to do. And his emotions caused him to pity the man. Third, Jesus applied his knowledge. He began the application by determining in his heart to do good. His strongest commitment was to God, and his greatest desire was to act in a way that honored and glorified God, particularly by healing the man. Finally, Jesus used his will to make and to carry out his decision to heal the man.

So, we see that applying knowledge is the final step in each of our ethical decisions. It's where our heart determines to remain committed to God, desiring to glorify him. And it's where our will chooses to think, speak and do what his Word requires.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on choosing good, we've looked at our various existential faculties, our abilities and capacities, in terms of the three steps in our decision-making process: the step of acquiring knowledge, where we gather information; the step of assessing knowledge, where we evaluate the information we've gathered; and the step of applying knowledge, where we actually make and act on our ethical choices.

Choosing the good should be every Christian's goal. We study ethics because we want to make the right choices. We examine God's Word, our modern situations and ourselves to know how to make decisions that please the Lord. Throughout this series we have seen the importance of paying attention to all these factors and more. But ultimately, after all our study, every ethical problem comes down to an existential decision: Will you choose what is good? Your answer to this question will determine if you have truly made a biblical decision.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. John Frame (Host) is Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He began his teaching career at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and later became a founding faculty member at Westminster Seminary California, where he taught for more than 20 years. He is also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Dr. Frame received both his Master of Arts and Master of Philosophy degrees from Yale University and his Doctor of Divinity degree from Belhaven College. A prolific writer, Dr. Frame has authored numerous books and articles, including *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (P&R, 2013) and *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P&R, 2015). His book, *The Doctrine of God* (P&R, 2002) won the 2003 Gold Medallion Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. He has also contributed to several theological reference volumes, such as the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (IVP, 2006).

Dr. Steve Blakemore is the Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

Dr. Steve Curtis is Director of Timothy Two Project International.

Dr. Jeff Lowman is Senior Pastor at Evangel Church PCA in Alabaster, Alabama and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. John Norwood is Senior Pastor of the Ujima Village Christian Church in Ewing, New Jersey, and is the founder and director of the Christian Mission School of Theology.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries.

Rev. Cameron Shaffer is the pastor of Langhorne Presbyterian Church in Langhorne, PA.

Rev. Dr. Henk Stoker is Professor of Theology at North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

Dr. Peter Walker has served as Professor of Biblical Studies at Trinity School for Ministry and as Associate Vice-Principal at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He is currently an instructor with Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies.

GLOSSARY

Christian ethics – Theology viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not

conscience – God-given ability to discern good and evil

emotions – A disproportionate and often excessive focus on the emotions

ethical judgment – The application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

ethics – The study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil

existential faculties – Capacities and abilities to make ethical decisions, including experience, imagination, reason, conscience, emotions, heart and will

existential perspective – Ethical perspective that considers the person, the motives, and the inner leading of the Holy Spirit; one of the three perspectives on human knowledge used by theologian John Frame in his Tri-Perspectivalism; concerned with the response of the believing heart through emotion and feeling

experience – God's revelation through human persons

heart – In biblical use, the sum of all inward dispositions; the seat of moral knowledge and moral will

human will – A person's faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, intending and making decisions

imagination – The ability to form mental images of things that are beyond our experience

lev – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning “heart”; commonly used in the bible to refer to all aspects of the inner person, including emotion, will, mind, and conscience

normative perspective – Ethical perspective that looks to God's Word as the norm or standard for making ethical decisions

reason – The capacity to make logical inferences and to judge logical consistency

situational perspective – Approach to ethics with an emphasis on the situation and how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions