

LECTURE 1: ETHICS AND THE MORAL LAW

Definitions

Ethics

From the classical Greek ἠθικός *ethikos* (adj. “of or for morals, ethical, moral [as opposed to intellectual],” a term expressive of moral character). The Greek term is related to the term ἦθος *ethos*, used in 1 Cor 15:33 (NIV “character”). In English *ethics* has come to mean “the science of morals, the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty” (*OED*). It is a branch of the field of axiology, the study of values. In the Christian context, ethics is the study of what God expects of humans in their personal and social behavior. We find the source of this study in the law of God, revealed in the Scriptures.

Types of law

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith (chapter 19, “Of the Law of God”), biblical law can be divided into three major categories: moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law.

II. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six our duty to man.

III. Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws containing several typical ordinances; partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth diverse instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament.

IV. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Moral law

Moral law is that law which is based on God’s nature and on the realities of his created order.

- God’s nature does not change.
- Realities and relationships within his created order may change.

- Therefore, a change within the created order itself is necessary before there can be a change in the moral law. E.g., the seventh commandment presupposes the institution of marriage.
- Further, the moral law can be so understood, that ultimately it is itself unchangeable, if its principles be understood, as based in God's nature.

Civil law

Civil law is that law which governs people in society. It is based on moral law, but it can change with changing conditions in society and government.

WCF 19:4, "To them also (Israel), as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require."

Ceremonial law

Ceremonial law is that code of divinely imposed, arbitrary laws, which are not based on the moral law as such, but are intended primarily to teach religious or moral truth.

WCF 19:3, "God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament."

Time of laws

All these types of biblical law are found in each major dispensation, as the following chart demonstrates:

<u>Law type</u>	<u>Pre-fall</u>	<u>After fall</u>	<u>Mosaic</u>	<u>NT</u>
Moral:	Sabbath, Serve God only	No murder	10 Coms., 2 Great Coms.	Several coms., 2 Great Coms.
Civil:	Regulate animals, Family law	Capital punishment	Israeli laws	Civil magistrate
Ceremonial:	Not tree of knowledge, Tree of life	Eat no blood, Sacrifices, Circumcision	Priesthood, Holy days	Baptism, Lord's Supper

History of the moral law

Since ethics is the study of human morals and duty, it is concerned primarily with the moral law. For this reason, an understanding of moral law is imperative for the proper application of ethics within any historical context.

The moral law given to Adam

The moral law was part of the covenant of works (WCF 19:1, WLC 92, WSC 40).

WLC 92, "The rule of obedience revealed to Adam in the estate of innocence, and to all mankind in him, beside a special command, not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was the moral law."

This responsibility on Adam's part is implied by the very nature of moral law, and in Adam's moral responsibility as a creature in God's image (Gen 1:27). Likewise, the threat of death in Gen 2:17 implies that Adam was living in a legal structure (cf. Rom 10:5; quotes Lev. 18:5, "The man who does these things will live by them").

Biblical data concerning Adam confirm the existence of moral law at that time. Note these examples:

- Com. #1 – Honor God first, obey him over wife, etc.
- #2 – God defines order of worship, tree of life
- #3 – Work the earth, respect for creation
- #4 – Sabbath rest, Gen 2:2-3
- #5 – To have children
- #6 – To help self and others live
- #7 – Marriage instituted
- #8 – Working in garden to procure "wealth and outward estate"
- #9 – Evil results of false witness, Gen 3:4, 14
- #10 – Evil results of coveting, Gen 3:6

The moral law still in force after the fall

WLC 94, "Although no man since the fall can attain to righteousness and life by the moral law; yet there is great use thereof, as well common to all men, as peculiar either to the unregenerate, or the regenerate."

The moral law was administered through conscience (cf. Rom 1:32; 1 Cor 5:1). It was also administered through direct revelation.

Ethics

Western Reformed Seminary (<http://wrs.edu>)

John A. Battle, Th.D.

- Preaching of Enoch, Jude 14-15
- Preaching of Noah, 1 Pet 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:5
- Job and his friends
- Known and taught by Abraham, Gen 17:1; 18:19; 26:5

People in that dispensation were held accountable for obeying the moral law (Rom 5:13-14). The punishment of Sodom for its wickedness is a good example.