

The Razor's Edge

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

We live in an ethically and morally confused age. One of the primary areas of confusion is the blurring of the concepts of ethics and morality. There is an important distinction between the two that is very important for Christians to understand. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul defines the basic differences between ethics and morality and also explains why we so often encounter “gray areas” in our ethical choices.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to define the basic meaning of “ethics” and the basic meaning of “morality.”
2. To be able to explain the two fundamental problems that are encountered by every Christian who seeks after righteousness.

QUOTATIONS

When men have an awareness of divine judgment adjoined to them as a witness which does not let them hide their sins but arraigns them as guilty before the judgment seat—this awareness is called “conscience.”

— John Calvin

The teachings of Scripture are the final court of appeal for ethics. Human reason, church tradition, and the natural and social sciences may aid moral reflection, but divine revelation, found in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, constitutes the “bottom line” of the decision making process.

— John Jefferson Davis

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. Ethics, as a science, is a subcategory of theology.
- B. Ethics is not the result of an evolutionary development over the long course of history.

II. Ethics and Morality

- A. The word “ethic” comes from the Greek word *ethikos*, and the word “moral” comes from the Latin word *moralis*.
- B. The “ethos” of a society or culture is its underlying foundational philosophy, its concept of values, its understanding of how the world fits together, while mores have to do with the customs, habits, and normal forms of behavior that are found within a given culture or society.
- C. Ethics is a normative science (the study of norms and standards by which things are measured or evaluated), while morality is a descriptive science (the study of the way things happen to operate or behave).
- D. Ethics is concerned with the imperative, while morality is concerned with the indicative.
- E. Ethics is concerned with “ought-ness,” while morality is concerned with “is-ness.”
- F. Ethics is concerned with what people ought to be doing, while morality describes what people actually do.

III. Statistical Morality

- A. Out of the confusion of ethics and morality has come “statistical morality,” in which the normal becomes the normative.
- B. We find out what people are doing to define the normal, and then we determine that if it is normal, it must be good.
- C. Statistical morality is exactly the opposite of the biblical ethics to which we are called.
- D. Statistical morality would be fine if we lived in a society in which every person were morally and ethically perfect, but according to the Scriptures, we live in a fallen world that has been corrupted by the intrusion of evil.
- E. Until each one of us has arrived at the fullness of the measure of Christ, there will be a difference between what is and what ought to be.
- F. The Christian concept of ethics is on a collision course with much of what is being expressed as morality in our contemporary society because Christianity does not determine right and wrong on the grounds of what everyone else is doing.

IV. The Ultimate Foundation of Christian Ethics

- A. The character of God provides the ultimate foundation of Christian ethics.
- B. When it comes to the quest for righteousness that is every Christian’s duty, there are only two fundamental problems.

- i. The first problem is simply to know what the good is, what it is that is pleasing to God.
- ii. The second problem is to have the moral courage to do what we know to be the good.

V. Gray Areas

- A. There are different ways of talking about gray areas in ethics.
- B. We may use the term “gray areas” to talk about matters of behavior that are adiaphora—morally neutral matters.
- C. One school of thought says that there are many things about which the Bible says nothing and that in these cases, the Christian should be able to exercise his conscience.
- D. Another school of thought argues that there is nothing neutral under the sun, that everything we do is to be done to the glory of God, so that nothing I do is without ethical bearing.
- E. While the Bible is clear in saying that everything we do is to be done to the glory of God, it is also clear in telling us that certain things, in and of themselves, are adiaphora.
- F. Playing ping-pong, for example, is neither prohibited nor commanded by Scripture and is morally neutral, but if a person became addicted to playing ping-pong to the degree that he neglected other responsibilities, then that person would have moved from adiaphora to sin.
- G. Gray areas can also represent areas of confusion or ignorance about ethical principles.
- H. People are not always sure where the line between righteousness and unrighteousness is drawn.
- I. Many times, evil is nothing more and nothing less than abusing things that were created good.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Ethics, as a science, is a subcategory of _____.
 - a. Psychology
 - b. Biology
 - c. Morality
 - d. Theology

2. The _____ of a society or culture is its underlying foundational philosophy, its concept of values, its understanding of how the world fits together.
 - a. Mores
 - b. Ethos
 - c. Adiaphora
 - d. Psychology

3. The _____ of a society has/have to do with the customs, habits, and normal forms of behavior that are found within that society.
 - a. Mores
 - b. Ethos
 - c. Adiaphora
 - d. Psychology

4. What term does Dr. Sproul use to describe the case in which the normal becomes the normative?
 - a. Statistical ethics
 - b. Statistical morality
 - c. Probable morality
 - d. Descriptive ethics

5. What term is used to describe morally neutral matters?
 - a. Gray areas
 - b. Ethos
 - c. Adiaphora
 - d. Sin

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read Matthew 4:4 and the original Old Testament text in Deuteronomy 8:3. What fundamental ethical principle is set forth in these words?

2. How do the following passages teach us to deal with the difficult issue of “gray areas” in ethics and morality?
 - a. Romans 14:1–8
 - b. 1 Corinthians 8:9

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between ethics and morality. Provide examples of things that would fall into each category.

2. What does Dr. Sproul mean by “statistical morality”?

3. Why is it impossible for “statistical morality” to produce a truly “good” morality? In what ways are the presuppositions of “statistical morality” exactly the opposite of Christian ethics?

4. How should Christians deal with ethical “gray areas”?

APPLICATION

Do you belong to the school of thought that believes there are many things about which the Bible says nothing and Christians should be able to exercise their consciences, or do you believe that nothing is neutral and without ethical bearing before God? In order to understand better why you believe what you believe, write down the scriptural reasons for your position.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Davis, John Jefferson. *Evangelical Ethics*, pp. 1–13