

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 2

The Normative Perspective:
God and His Word

Lesson Guide



thirdmill

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

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ABOUT THIRDMILL

Founded in 1997, Thirdmill is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically trained educators, our translators are theologically astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Thirdmill has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Thirdmill is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit www.thirdmill.org.

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

Ethical judgment involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person.

II. God as Standard (3:37)

God is the absolute ethical norm — he is not accountable to any standard outside or above himself.

A. God in Himself (4:43)

1. Personal Attribute (5:21)

Apart from God's character, there can be no such thing as goodness or rightness.

God is perfectly free from sin by defining sin as that which is foreign to God's nature (1 John 1:5-7).

God's goodness is perfect in quality, absolute in degree, and unique to the persons of the Trinity:

- Mark 10:18
- Psalm 5:4
- Daniel 4:37
- Matthew 4:48

2. **Ultimate Standard (11:12)**

Biblical writers sometimes appear to evaluate God by standards other than his own character (Psalm 119:65, 68).

The law is not external to God; rather, it is his self-expression (Psalm 119:137, 142).

God's own personal goodness is the absolute standard by which all ethical issues are to be evaluated.

B. **God as Judge (17:00)**

God will judge all people by their actions on the last day (John 5:27-30):

- Curses on those whose works are evil
- Blessings on those whose works are good

God will make the ultimate determination of whether or not we have lived morally or immorally (Job 40:2-14):

- his judgments will be utterly binding
- no basis to challenge his authority
- no way to avert his judgments

It is God's right to judge because he has absolute authority, and his judgments are inescapable because he has absolute power.

All of his determinations are just and right — he judges according to the immutable standard of his character (Job 34:10-12).

C. Implications (21:43)

God's power, and his authority to judge obligate his creatures to live according to the standard of his character (1 Peter 1:15-16).

We are to be holy as God's creatures, submitting to God's directives for the ways *human beings* are to be holy (Matthew 5:44-48).

Many people confronted with God's sovereign authority disregard God's commands and invent rules for their own lives.

Some Christians confuse forgiveness with *license*, wrongly imagining that because all our sins are forgiven, we may live as we please.

Only if we are imitating God does the blood of Christ cleanse us from sin (1 John 1:7).

III. Word as Standard (27:23)

A. Three Categories (28:30)

- Special revelation – direct communications from God (Scripture, prophecy, dreams and visions)
- General revelation – history, the universe, weather, plants, animals and human beings
- Existential revelation – God’s revelation in persons

B. Normative Character (31:10)

1. General Revelation (31:27)

General revelation concerns the way creation and history teach us true things about God and his moral requirements of us.

Though general revelation can’t teach us everything, it speaks clearly enough to teach us true things about God.

- **Complexity (33:43)**

There are varying degrees of generalness and specialness within the category of general revelation.

God is patient and kind, even toward sinners who hate him (Matthew 5:44-45).

The history of redemption tells us a tremendous amount about God, ourselves, and salvation (Acts 17:30-31).

The general revelation of the historical resurrection holds all people to account.

- **Importance (38:17)**

Protestants have always affirmed the validity and binding authority of general revelation (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 1).

We are obligated to obey God's self-revelation that comes to us through general revelation (Romans 1:18-20).

General revelation is a standard (norm) for belief about God that is binding on all people (Romans 1:32).

dikaiōma (δικαίωμα) – “ordinance,” “judgment”

General revelation is a revealed standard that is known to everyone and that God commands everyone to obey.

We reject general revelation's obvious meaning in favor of other meanings (Romans 1:21).

Revelation in creation is still binding and is still God's revealed standard to which we must conform (Psalm 19:1).

2. **Special Revelation (44:28)**

- **Complexity (45:35)**

Special revelation involves God communicating with people in ways that transcend normal means.

“Special” – extraordinary or supernatural communication between God and man:

- *Direct communication*: God spoke directly with Moses (Exodus 33:11)
- *Dreams*: God used dreams to communicate with Pharaoh (Genesis 41)
- *Scripture*: the most “special,” most common form of special revelation (Exodus 31:18)

- **Importance (51:35)**

All special revelation is a standard to which we must adhere:

- Acts 17:28-30 – Paul quoted the pagan poets drawing application from their words that is binding on all mankind.
- Jeremiah 25:8-9 – the people had refused to listen to God’s prophets, so he threatened extreme covenant judgment against them.

3. **Existential Revelation (54:34)**

God also reveals himself in and through persons.

God uses “councils ... ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits” to reveal his will to his people (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.10).

Human judgments are forms of existential revelation:

- joint theological conclusions reached by groups of people
- judgments of individuals
- the inward leading and illumination of the Holy Spirit within believers

Categories of existential revelation:

- External aspects
 - *Human existence* – we can learn many things about God by looking at people.
 - *Human judgment* – related to our being created in God's image (Genesis 1:26).

God delegated of authority to human beings to rule over the world.

Thinking and judging are exercises of divinely delegated authority, reflecting God's character (Genesis 2:19).

God uses joint deliberations in order to determine the proper course of action for the church (Acts 15:28-29).

God even uses judgments of small groups of Christians to guide his people into truth (Matthew 18:16, 20).

- *Human behavior* – Biblical authors encouraged their readers to imitate the behavior of others (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

- Internal aspects
 - *Illumination* – a divine gift of understanding that God gives to believers, and even unbelievers.

Matthew 16:15-17 – the Holy Spirit worked within Peter to bring him to an understanding that Jesus was the Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:11-12 – the Holy Spirit works within believers to give us a supernatural understanding of the gospel and God's truth.

Philippians 1:29 – God gave (*charizomai*, “granted”) to the Philippians their faith in Jesus.

Romans 2:14-15 – God implants in every human being a basic knowledge of his law.

- *Inward leading* – the Holy Spirit’s work in us to reveal truth about God’s character (emotive and intuitive).

Our desires communicate impressions and intuitions about God’s character to us (Philippians 2:13).

C. Unity (1:12:58)

Ethical judgment involves “the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person.”

The unity of God’s revelation indicates that our ethical judgments should be informed by all the revelation available:

- Scripture (special revelation) is entirely sufficient to instruct us regarding Christian ethics.
- Without books and language (general revelation), we wouldn’t even have access to the special revelation of Scripture.
- The illumination of the Holy Spirit (existential revelation) is crucial to our comprehending the message of Scripture.

IV. Conclusion (1:15:31)

Review Questions

1. How is God himself the absolute standard for morality?

2. How does God serve as the absolute judge of morality?

3. Describe the three categories of revelation that are part of God's Word.

4. How does general revelation teach us about God's standard?

5. How does special revelation teach us about God's standard?

6. How does existential revelation teach us about God's standard?

7. How are general, special and existential revelation interconnected?

Application Questions

1. In what ways do you strive to know God? Give an example of a time when knowing God has revealed a proper course of action to you.
2. How do people respond to the fact that God is the absolute moral judge? What human parallels make this idea easier to understand? What human parallels make this truth harder to understand?
3. Read 1 John 1:7. Why did John say that our obligation to obey God's standard is related to our forgiveness in Christ?
4. Describe some true things about God that you have learned through general revelation.
5. Describe some true things about God that you have learned through special revelation.
6. How may believers learn truth about God by looking at other people?
7. Give an example of the Holy Spirit's illumination in your life. Give an example of the Holy Spirit's illumination in the life of an unbeliever.
8. Explain the importance of using all forms of God's revelation in making ethical decisions.
9. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?

Glossary

charizomai – Greek verb (transliteration) meaning “to give freely,” “to grant,” “to forgive”

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

dikaiōma – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “decree,” “ordinance,” “judgment”

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

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

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

existential revelation – God’s revelation through human persons

general revelation – God’s use of the natural world and its workings to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to all humanity

illumination – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily cognitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

inward leading – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily emotive or intuitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

Jerusalem Council – Meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 where the apostles and church leaders addressed concerns in the early church; in particular, whether or not Gentiles were required to follow the Mosaic law to be saved

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

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

special revelation – God’s disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647