

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 4

The Normative Perspective:
Parts & Aspects of Scripture

Lesson Guide



thirdmill

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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. Variety (2:29)

A. Language (4:01)

The Bible displays the full range of language that we find in all human communication.

1. Extraordinary (6:07)

Many Christians assume Scripture communicates in ways that are radically different from the ways language normally works.

Theologians in the Middle Ages believed that the Bible communicated in ways that exceeded human comprehension.

They believed every text had at least some metaphoric meaning, regardless of the human authors' intentions.

Some today argue that Scripture's extraordinary nature makes it easy to interpret.

Some treat passages as if they were utterly comprehensive rather than limited in their scope.

2. **Ordinary (11:40)**

Scripture conveys the message of the gospel by speaking in ordinary language and communicating in normal ways:

- Matthew 6:11 – Jesus petitioned God through imperative.
- Amos 4:4, 5:5 – The prophet used imperatives and sarcasm.

We have to learn how the authors ordinarily used language, and understand what their intent was when they wrote.

B. **Literature (16:15)**

Scripture contains many different forms or genres of literature.

Ethics generally focuses on passages in the Bible that contain laws, or that directly teach moral standards and obligations.

Every passage in the Bible reveals God's character.

We must search all types of biblical literature for their revelations of God's ethical standards.

1. Factual Content (19:57)

Biblical narratives obligate us to accept their factual content.

The mere presentation of these facts in biblical narratives obligates us to believe them.

2. Transforming Power (20:51)

Biblical history has the power to transform us ethically.

Knowing some biblical history is necessary if we're to have saving faith in Christ.

3. Historical Setting (21:52)

Biblical narratives provide the historical setting for God's laws (Exodus 20:2).

4. Divine Evaluations (23:45)

“Christian ethics” refers to theology viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not.

The divine evaluations in biblical narratives provided readers with examples to follow and to reject.

5. Authorial Comments (24:43)

The authors of biblical history recorded their own ethical comments (Genesis 13:12-13).

Their comments represent the outlooks of God himself, and provide us with many ethical considerations.

Every type of biblical literature is normative:

- poetry – tells us how we should feel
- prophecy – talks about God’s satisfaction or anger with human behavior
- wisdom literature – calls us to conform our thinking to God’s own understandings

Paul insisted that all Scripture, regardless of literary genre, equips Christians to please God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

C. Implications (28:03)

We should not rely entirely on straightforward instruction.

It can be helpful to teach and preach ethics in the various forms of language used by Scripture itself.

III. God's Law (30:37)

“God’s law” refers to those portions of Scripture that are written in the literary form of a legal code.

All Scripture is normative but the law contains the clearest and most explicit expressions of many of God’s ethical requirements.

A. Ten Commandments (32:09)

The Ten Commandments have *historical* primacy over Scripture’s other commandments (Galatians 3:17).

- Israel became the first nation to possess an extensive, supernaturally revealed code of God’s holy requirements (Genesis 17:1).
- They were the preliminary and summary statement for the other laws Israel received — the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21–23).

The Ten Commandments also have *theological* primacy among other laws (Exodus 24:12):

- God himself carved the Ten Commandments in the stone tablets (Deuteronomy 9:10).

- God allowed himself to be viewed by Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and the elders of Israel when he gave them the commandments.
- Moses identified the Ten Commandments as God's very covenant with his people (Deuteronomy 4:13).
- The tablets were given special recognition and were placed within the ark of the covenant, God's footstool (Exodus 40:20).
- Jesus indicated that by obeying the Ten Commandments a person can earn eternal life (Matthew 19:17-19).

Their primacy has been recognized and reflected in Christian and Jewish traditions throughout history.

B. Three Types (42:04)

The Protestant church has commonly categorized Old Testament laws into three groups:

- moral – God's ethical standards
- ceremonial – instruction for worshiping God
- civil – rules for governing society

1. **Qualifications (43:55)**

Categorizing the laws this way creates some challenges:

- These categories are not taught explicitly in the Bible.

- Scripture presents some laws as belonging to more than one category:
 - Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11, 31:14-16)

 - murder (Exodus 20:13)

All Old Testament laws had moral, ceremonial and civil aspects.

2. **Value (47:05)**

These categories have value for understanding how God intended his law to apply to his people:

- helps us see more clearly that the law was God's comprehensive standard for his people's lives:
 - moral law (prophetic office) – prophets were primarily concerned with covenant righteousness.

 - ceremonial law (priestly office) – pertains directly to functions carried out or supervised by priests.

 - civil law (office of king) – king oversaw the government and public order.

- helps us interpret laws the Bible does not fully explain

3. **Application (48:58)**

Christ's death, burial, resurrection and ascension freed us from the specific requirements of the Old Testament law (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 19, sections 3 & 4).

Believers no longer have to behave in many of the ways specified in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws still apply to modern Christians, and guide us as God's standard today.

- **God's character (55:22)**

God's character is our ultimate standard for ethics.

Everything revealed about God in the Old Testament law continues to be true today.

- **Teaching of Scripture (56:15)**

Scripture affirms the continuing modern application of every Old Testament law (Matthew 5:18-19).

Until Christ returns even the least of the commandments is to be taught and observed.

- **Unity of law (57:27)**

It is a unified whole that stands together without regard to distinctions between ceremonial, civil or moral divisions

According to James, the law was indivisible because it all came from the same God (James 2:10-11).

- **All of Scripture (58:12)**

The ceremonial, civil, and moral laws all have something to teach us about modern ethics.

Even the ceremonial and civil laws are useful for training us in the ways of righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

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

- Zelophehad’s daughters (Numbers 27:3-8)

According to the law, Zelophehad’s daughters could not receive an inheritance in the Promised Land.

Moses faced the issue of how to apply the standard revealed by the law to a new situation.

God indicated that the same aspect of his character was to be applied in different ways in different situations.

Christ the Prophet fulfills the moral aspects of the law:

- depend on Christ’s morality alone as the basis for our acceptance before God.
- conform ourselves to Christ’s image and example
- seek to live as morally as Christ did and does

Christ the Priest fulfills the ceremonial aspects of the law:

- follow them by trusting Christ as our sacrifice, and by worshiping in Spirit and in truth

Christ the King fulfills the civil aspects of the law:

- must live rightly under our earthly governments, which are under Christ's greater lordship

- honor Christ as king by keeping his commandments

IV. Unity (1:05:18)

A. Commandment of Love (1:06:11)

“Love commandment” refers primarily the commandment to love God and by implication to the commandment to love one another.

Jesus taught that every other commandment depends upon these two laws (Matthew 22:37-40).

Paul taught that the command to love our neighbor is inseparable from every other command (Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14).

A person who loves perfectly will keep every commandment of the law (Deuteronomy 6:1-5).

B. Gospel of Grace (13:42)

Some Christians mistakenly believe that the law is contrary to the gospel of grace:

- We are saved by grace apart from works of the law, and have no obligation to obey the law.
- The law is a threat against sinners but the gospel saves us after the law has condemned us.

Three uses of the law in Scripture:

The first use – pedagogical (law as teacher)

The second use – civil (societal)

The third use – normative (moral)

- pedagogical – shows us our sin, teaches us of the danger we're in without Christ's saving grace, and drives us to repentance and faith in Christ.

The first use of the law is how God's law enlivens sin within unbelievers and shows them their need for Christ (Romans 7:7-8).

This use of the law is associated with the biblical teaching that believers were once under law, but are now under grace.

The pedagogical use does not apply directly to believers since, once we come to Christ, we are no longer under the law (Romans 6:14)

- civil – involves the way the law restrains sin by threatening punishment against those who violate it, believers and unbelievers alike.

God has designed the law in civil societies as an instrument for restraining evil.

We are to obey our civil authorities — unless and until our governments defy the law of God.

- normative – applies the law as the revelation of God’s will for Christian living

The law remains the standard for our behavior (1 John 3:4).

The law is still the standard by which Christian behavior is judged to be righteous or sinful and this is perfectly compatible with the gospel.

Believers are “under law” in the sense that we receive its blessings, and we are obligated to obey it (James 1:25).

C. New Covenant (1:21:53)

The law is central in the new covenant (Hebrews 8:8-10).

In the new covenant, we internalize the law and keep it earnestly (Deuteronomy 6:6; Psalm 119:11).

The new covenant gives us even greater reasons to obey the law:

- Old Testament believers looked back to the exodus and to life in the Promised Land as the grounds for their obedience to the law.
- Christians look back to the greater work of salvation in Christ and of his second coming as the grounds for our obedience.

Many laws that obligated old covenant believers are now fulfilled by the reality that they foreshadowed (Hebrews 10:1).

D. Harmony (1:27:45)

Whenever our actions are in true agreement with any particular stipulation of the law, they are in agreement with the whole (James 2:10).

When Scriptures appear to contradict each other, we have not yet come to the law correctly:

- God's laws are given with the implicit understanding that, at times, some laws take priority over others (Matthew 5:23-24).
- Biblical laws are given with the implicit understanding that there are exceptions to rules (Acts 5:29).

The law anticipates that general principles will sometimes indicate contrary courses of action.

We must be obedient to the entire body of the law in its full meaning, even if it doesn't resemble the way we usually apply some principles.

V. Conclusion (1:33:39)

3. In light of the variety we find in Scripture, what are some implications for the way we teach ethics today?

4. In what ways is the primacy of the Ten Commandments both historical and theological?

5. What are the three traditional categories or types of Law, and how can we use them to help us apply the Law in the modern world?

6. How does the Law relate to the commandment of love?

7. What is the relationship between the Law and the gospel of grace?

8. Describe the Law in relation to redemptive history and the new covenant.

9. What harmony exists among all divine commands?

10. How is Scripture's unity displayed in regard to the Law?

Application Questions

1. In light of the Bible's ordinary use of language, how should you approach Scripture?
2. How should your knowledge of biblical history influence your behavior?
3. A friend of yours asks; "How can it be that in one sense the Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws have expired, but in another sense, they still apply?" How would you answer your friend's question?
4. How can the "love command" and all other biblical laws be aspects of each other?
5. What reason to obey the law does the new covenant give you?
6. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?

Glossary

abrogate – To repeal or do away with a law or agreement

Book of the Covenant – A collection of laws found in Exodus 20:18–23:33 that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai

ceremonial law – Aspect of the Old Testament law that gives instructions for worship and the sacrificial system

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

civil law – Aspect of the Old Testament law that gives principles for governing society

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

deontological – Rule-based or duty-oriented; concerned with moral obligation regardless of outcome

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 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

first use of the law – Use of the law as a teacher to expose sin and drive an unbeliever to Christ; also called "pedagogical use"

moral law – Aspect of God's Old Testament law that gives general ethical principles, often identified with the Ten Commandments

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

pedagogical: Of or related to teaching

Protestant Reformation – A sixteenth-century religious movement that attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but eventually broke away, forming the Protestant church

revelation – God's communication of truth to man

second use of the law – Use of the law to restrain sin in society; also called "civil use"

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

third use of the law – Use of the law as a guide or rule to show faithful Christians how to live a more ethical life; also called the "normative use"

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