

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 5

The Situational Perspective:
Revelation & Situation

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. Content (4:09)

Types of revelation:

- special revelation (Bible)
- general revelation (creation)
- existential revelation (people)

All forms of revelation communicate facts, goals, and means concerning our situation:

- facts – events, people, objects, ideas, duties, actions
- goals – the intended or potential outcomes of thoughts, words, and deeds
- means – ways of reaching our goals

A. Facts (6:00)

God is the most basic fact that we learn through revelation.

The reality of God's existence rules over every ethical question and obligates us to live by the standard of his character.

Through revelation, God tells us facts about himself and facts about what he requires.

When God reveals his character, he communicates the facts about what he requires of us.

B. Goals (10:05)

Goals in ethics refers to the expected outcomes of our efforts.

Our goals give direction to our actions.

Each type of revelation provides us with goals that we must adopt in Christian ethics:

- special revelation – presents God’s glory as the highest and most important goal (1 Corinthians 10:31)
- general revelation – teaches us that the greatest goal is to glorify God (Romans 1:20-21, NIV)

- existential revelation – helps us to discern good goals from evil goals, especially through our consciences (Philippians 2:13, NIV)

Revelation provides us with the goals that direct our actions and help us make ethical decisions.

C. **Means (15:27)**

“The end justifies the means.” – Niccolò Machiavelli

For Christians to answer any ethical question in a biblical manner, we must find the appropriate means that God has revealed.

The means we choose are a vitally important element of our decision-making process (James 2:15-16).

Without godly means for meeting our goals, we haven't done anything good or praiseworthy.

Scripture uses special revelation to convey the means to accomplishing godly goals:

- 1 Corinthians 10:8-11 – negative examples of the ancient Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness

- 1 Corinthians 11:1 – positive examples of ethical behavior (Jesus, Paul)

III. Nature (22:17)

God's revelation comes to human beings in the context of history.

Scripture has a practical priority over everything we find in general and existential revelation.

A. Inspiration (25:10)

The Holy Spirit motivated and superintended the writings of the human authors in order to ensure that everything they contain is true.

Scripture has a unified meaning, in which both the Holy Spirit and the human author intended the same thing.

1. Holy Spirit (26:55)

Everything we find in Scripture carries God's authority and is utterly trustworthy (2 Peter 1:20-21).

2. **Human Writers (29:01)**

Some teachers have wrongly believed that the human writers made no contribution to their own writings.

Jesus refuted this idea when he quoted Psalm 110:1 in his debate with the Pharisees (Matthew 22:41-45).

To understand the original meaning of any given Scripture, we have to learn about its authors:

- facts (historical, cultural, linguistic)
- goals (motives, hopes)
- means (language, techniques, arguments)

B. Example (31:59)

Biblical writers and reliable biblical characters often explained Scriptures that had been written by prior authors.

- 1 Corinthians 10:5-11 – Paul drew details from Old Testament passages:
 - Exodus 32 – the Israelites engaged in idolatrous revelries and about 3,000 men were put to death as punishment
 - Numbers 25 – they “indulge[d] in sexual immorality,” and 23,000 died

- Numbers 21 – the Israelites tested the Lord, and many were “destroyed by serpents”
- Numbers 16 – they grumbled against Moses and many were killed by “the Destroyer”

Moses wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to warn — *nouthesia* (νουθεσία) — future generations (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Paul highlighted the facts in these passages:

- “God was not pleased” by the actions of the ancient Israelites.
- God had “overthrown them in the wilderness.”
- The Israelites committed specific sins that displeased God — idolatry, sexual immorality, testing, and grumbling.

Paul assumed the facts that Scripture is true, it is authoritative, and it is applicable to Christians.

Paul considered situational matters as he interpreted these inspired Old Testament texts:

- the details reported in Scripture
- the author’s intention

Paul's method for understanding the Old Testament is an example of the situational features we must consider when we interpret Scripture.

IV. Strategies (39:09)

Understanding the situation of Scripture and the situation of our own day is often quite complex.

A. Laxity (40:54)

1. Description (41:24)

Laxity is a strategy that tends toward permissiveness:

- The situations in the Bible are so different from situations in modern life that the Bible cannot be applied to our day.
- The situations in the Bible are too vague to be applied to modern life.

Since not everything that is unclear in Scripture is permitted, laxity encourages us to permit things that Scripture actually forbids.

A lax understanding tends to place too few restrictions on Christian behavior.

2. Consequences (44:05)

A strategy of laxity encourages Christians to rationalize many sins:

- encourages Christians to be satisfied with choosing the lesser of contrasting wrongs

- permits exceptions to biblical commands so Christians justify wrongs not *explicitly* forbidden

- encourages Christians to add false qualifications to the Bible's commands
 - Deuteronomy 25:4
 - 1 Corinthians 9:9; 1 Timothy 5:18

- leads to thinking that good motives sometimes excuse evil actions
 - Proverbs 6:30-31

A strategy of laxity encourages us to navigate God's law with as much personal license as possible.

3. Correctives (50:40)

To avoid laxity, we must understand both the Bible's similarity to the modern world and its clarity.

Every passage of the Bible has something to teach us about ethics in the modern world (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).

The Bible also teaches that Scripture is sufficiently clear (Deuteronomy 29:29)

Scripture is always clear enough for us to draw ethical applications from it.

B. Rigor (54:08)

1. Description (54:22)

Rigor is extremely concerned with guarding against sin, erring on the side of overly restricting behavior rather than permitting it.

Rigor is a result from mistaken beliefs about the Bible's similarity to the modern world and about its clarity:

- views the situations of the Bible as being so similar to our own that the Bible is applicable to our lives

- assumes that when the Bible appears to be vague, the proper response is to apply Scripture in restrictive ways

When we respond to the Bible in such restrictive ways, we often end up forbidding some things God permits or even commands.

2. Consequences (57:34)

Negative results of a rigorous approach:

- destroys Christian freedom by prohibiting behaviors that are wrong under certain conditions, but good under others
 - 1 Corinthians 8, 10
 - Romans 14
 - 1 Timothy 4:4-5
- inspires despair by turning God's word into a burden
 - Mark 2:27
 - Romans 9:4-5

This tendency causes Christians to be preoccupied with law-keeping.

A strategy of rigor both hinders our attempts to learn our duty and hampers our ability to take joy in the God of our salvation.

3. **Correctives (1:02:43)**

We can't simplistically mimic the applications in Scripture:

- differences in situations
 - Exodus 20:13
 - Hebrews 11:32-33
- clarity of Scripture
 - Deuteronomy 29:29

C. **Human Authority (1:06:50)**

1. **Description (1:07:03)**

Reliance on human authority leads Christians to strongly defer to the judgment of other human beings.

We must never blindly submit to humans authorities.

2. **Consequences (1:09:59)**

Problems from depending too heavily on human authority:

- rejects the supreme authority of Scripture
 - Matthew 15:4-6

- endorses false interpretations
 - Second Council of Sirmium (A.D. 351)

This strategy constitute a rejection of Scripture's unique authority.

3. **Corrective (1:14:11)**

We must always maintain the supremacy of Scripture as our ultimate revealed norm.

The Scriptures are the very words of God and no human tradition or interpretation can speak with the unquestionable authority of God (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 1, section 10).

We should measure every human judgment against Scripture (Acts 17:11, NIV).

V. **Application (1:18:12)**

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

To apply God's word rightly, we need to know something about our modern situation.

God's Word provides limited information about his character but enough information to *figure out* what to do in every instance.

A. Facts (1:20:24)

Changes in facts require changes in the application of God's Word.

- Moses and the exodus: strict laws – eat only clean animals in particular ways
 - Leviticus 17:3, 4 – clean animals must first be presented to the Lord at the tabernacle
 - Deuteronomy 12:15 – clean animals slaughtered and eaten any in towns

- New Testament church – the application of dietary laws changed
 - Acts 10:9-16 – all animals clean, so as not to pose a stumbling block to the inclusion of the Gentiles (1 Timothy 4:2-5).

The factual similarities and differences influenced ethical judgments.

We can and must learn from these laws but they are not in force in the same ways in our day.

Our circumstances parallel those of the early church (Acts 10:9-16; 1 Corinthians 8–10; Romans 14).

We must identify the similarities and differences between the modern facts and the biblical facts, and to render ethical judgments accordingly.

B. Goals (1:29:01)

- Moses and the exodus – the goal of the dietary laws was human holiness that mirrored God’s holiness.
 - Leviticus 11:44-45 – general goal of God’s glory and human holiness
 - Isaiah 62:12 – the prophet encouraged the people in the Promised Land to strive for holiness

- New Testament church
 - 1 Peter 1:15-16 – goal was no longer to separate Jews from Gentiles, but to unite Jews with Gentiles in the church.

The goals of God’s glory and human holiness were affirmed in all periods.

During the exodus, the goal for Jews to separate from Gentiles led to the judgment to refuse invitations to eat Gentile food.

The New Testament church was to *accept* invitations to eat Gentile food (Acts 10).

The goals of God's glory and our holiness have not changed — humanity must strive to be holy.

Our circumstances reflect those of the New Testament church where the goal was to unite Jews with Gentiles.

C. Means (1:35:53)

- Moses and the exodus – the means of striving for holiness required the sacrifice animals at the tabernacle.
 - Exodus 16:35 – diet primarily consisted of manna, not of meat from domestic animals
 - Deuteronomy 12:15 – God permitted the people to slaughter animals in towns.

- New Testament church – achieving holiness no longer required Jews to remain separate from Gentiles.
 - Acts 10:9-16 – holiness now required them to unite in order to fellowship with one another.

Food was always to be used to honor the holiness of God — the means were different so different judgments were rendered:

- the exodus – to sacrifice animals at the tabernacle
- Promised Land – to slaughter animals in towns
- New Testament church – unrestricted diet

Modern Christians should use diet to achieve holiness, to honor the holiness of God and to build holiness in his people.

The New Testament church used unrestricted diet, sanctified through prayer, as the means to pursue unity within the church.

Every norm revealed to us must be applied with diligence and wisdom, and not with simple imitation of the behavior in Scripture.

VI. Conclusion (1:41:48)

7. What characterizes an overly lax approach to revelation? What dangers does this strategy present? How can we avoid falling into this strategy?

8. What characterizes an overly rigorous approach to revelation? What dangers does this strategy present? How can we avoid falling into this strategy?

Application Questions

1. Why does God as our ultimate fact, our ultimate ethical environment, obligate us to live by the standard of his character? What happens if we ignore this fact?
2. First Corinthians 10:31 says, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” How can we glorify God in the mundane activities of life (i.e. brushing teeth, making the bed, driving a car, etc.)?
3. Why is it important to interpret the Bible within its historical context? What kinds of ethical mistakes can we make if we fail to interpret the Bible rightly?
4. Provide three real or hypothetical examples of the strategy of laxity. What overall impact might this strategy have on the person or community that has embraced it?
5. Provide three real or hypothetical examples of the strategy of rigor. What overall impact might this strategy have on the person or community that has embraced it?
6. Provide three real or hypothetical examples of the strategy of relying on human authority. What overall impact might this strategy have on the person or community that has embraced it?
7. Which popular strategy or strategies toward revelation most reflect your own practice? What practical steps can you take to correct these inclinations?
8. How does an understanding of the Scriptures as the supreme revealed authority keep us from falling into a strategy of laxity, rigor, or human authority?
9. We all make many ethical decisions every day. How might you use the insights of this lesson to help you make better decisions in the future?
10. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?

Glossary

Arianism – Heresy developed in the fourth century A.D. that denied the Son’s full membership in the Godhead and rejected Trinitarian doctrine

Athanasius – (ca. A.D. 296-373) Fourth-century Bishop of Alexandria and theologian who affirmed the Trinity and refuted Arianism

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

Council of Nicea – Church council held in the city of Nicea in A.D. 325 that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity and refuted Arianism

ecclesiastical – Relating to the church, especially as an established institution

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

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

Gentile – Non-Jewish person

heretic – A person who adopts beliefs that are in opposition to the official teachings of an established religion

inspiration – Theological term that refers to the way the Holy Spirit moved human beings to write God’s revelation as Scripture and superintended their work in a way that made their writings infallible

laxity – The quality of being too loose or relaxed, not strict or rigid enough; an interpretive strategy toward God’s revelation that tends toward permissiveness

Machiavelli, Niccolò – (1469-1527) Sixteenth century author who wrote *The Prince*; known for arguing that "the end justifies the means"

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

nouthesia – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “admonition” or “warning”

rigor – The quality of being overly strict, harsh or meticulous; an interpretive strategy toward God’s revelation that is extremely guarded against sin

Second Council of Sirmium – Church council held in A.D. 357 that affirmed the Arian heresy

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