

# **Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 1, Introduction**

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 1, The Introduction.

Hello, I'm Jim Spiegel. I'm a professor of philosophy and religion, and I'm going to give some lectures on Christian ethics. I've taught philosophy for the better part of three decades and taught for 27 years at Taylor University. I teach now at Indianapolis Theological Seminary.

My research and scholarly interests mainly fall in the areas of philosophy of religion and ethics, but I also do work in aesthetics, history of philosophy, philosophy of mind, and some other areas. So, we're going to talk about Christian Ethics and how to think about moral issues from a Christian standpoint that is also informed by important philosophical theories related to ethics. Ethics concerns how we should live.

It is a prescriptive field of study, asking what ought to be, not just what is. A number of fields like history and the sciences study what is the case. Those are descriptive fields of study.

Ethics is a normative field that is concerned with how things ought to be, how we should live, and what choices we ought to make in various contexts. Ethics also addresses issues that are important to everyone just because we are human. A number of other fields explore issues that may or may not interest everyone or be important to everyone.

If you study electrical engineering, for example, or sports, many people are interested in these subjects, and they are important, but you can have a flourishing life without much, if any, direct involvement in electrical engineering or athletics. Ethics is not like that. As human beings, we are called to live a certain way, to be responsible, to do our duties, to respect people's rights, and to act justly.

Whatever else you do, you need to be concerned about moral issues and living ethically. So, in studying how we ought to live, we need to be concerned with certain theoretical concepts like some of the things I just named. Obligation, what does that mean? What does it mean for someone to have rights? What is justice? What is fairness? What is virtue? These are all theoretical concepts, and we need to get some of these things straight and think about them explicitly before we move on to talk about practical issues.

There are certain practical issues that are more pressing than others, and we'll talk about some of the more controversial and divisive issues in our time that confront us, either in our personal lives, publicly, or both. Issues like abortion, euthanasia, war, drug legalization, sexual morality, and so on. So, let me say a few things about the various ethical traditions in the history of philosophy and theology.

This will help us to kind of categorize or begin categorizing the different moral perspectives that we'll talk about in some detail. The deontological approach to ethics emphasizes duty. This is usually primarily concerned with rules.

We'll talk about Kant's ethics and something he calls a categorical imperative in divine command theory and the Christian theological tradition. There's attention to divine commands, you know, the golden rule, the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, as well as specific commands. These are more deontological concerns.

Then, you have teleological ethics and ethical dimensions that we'll talk about as well. Teleological ethics emphasizes ends or goals and purposes, and the utilitarian tradition of ethics is more teleological, as is virtue ethics, which focuses on the human telos and what it means to fulfill the human design plan in terms of the various character traits that we should develop. And then you have a number of mixed approaches, hybrid approaches, like social contract ethics, which combines elements of deontology as well as teleology and natural law ethics, which is an important tradition within the history of Christian ethics.

Speaking of Christians and ethics, why should Christians study ethics? That's actually a question that's very easily answered, and the answer is that the Christian life is fundamentally about morality, living rightly before God, and that is a moral or ethical concern. There's a huge emphasis placed on right living in Scripture, just as a small sampling of passages that address this. Proverbs 15:9 says the way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but he loves him who pursues righteousness.

Micah 6:8, we are told, he has shown you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. So, justice, mercy, and humility are moral virtues or values that we're called to abide by, not just here but in lots of other places in Scripture, and those are moral qualities. Thirdly, the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Peter says in 1 Peter 3, and again, there are literally hundreds of other passages that extol us to living rightly, living righteously, being just, and living in a way that honors God morally. So, I just noted a number of biblical passages that emphasize justice and righteousness. Now we can ask, well, what is justice? What is righteousness?

And that takes us right into something called meta-ethics, where we're analyzing certain moral concepts and terms.

What does it mean to act justly and righteously as regards issues like abortion, euthanasia, war, capital punishment, and the treatment of animals? And these are all issues that we'll look at. Again, these are issues that we face, at least in a public sense, within a civil society where there are all sorts of problems that arise in the context of these issues, but also personally. We may find ourselves wrestling with some of these issues in a more personal way.

So, here's the approach we're going to take with our study of ethics and methodology. How should Christian ethics be done? That's actually one of the issues that's debated by Christian ethicists. To what extent should the Christian ethicist consult, use, and deploy philosophical theories and principles when doing moral analysis of various issues? The approach that I will take, which is the approach of every Christian moral scholar or ethicist that I know, is that we'll integrate our philosophical theorizing with our theological inquiry.

And I think that kind of integration of philosophy and theology is crucial, and it's even unavoidable. We make philosophical assumptions, as all of us do, when we approach the scriptures, as well as when we approach the rest of life. So, you really can't get away from philosophy, so we might as well do it well.

We might as well be explicit in our identification, articulation of, and analysis and assessment of various philosophical theories and principles. So, we'll do that for that reason. Philosophical arguments are unavoidable from a practical standpoint.

We live in a pluralistic society, and there are plenty of people out there who have no interest in theology in the first place. They will only listen to philosophical arguments. So, if we have a position that's a biblical, theologically correct position on any of these issues, if we want to be heard in the public square, if we want our arguments and ideas and positions to be taken seriously elsewhere in our society, we need to be able to defend them philosophically, as well as theologically.

For many years, when I taught at Taylor University and coached our moral issues debate team, which is called an ethics bowl team, competing with schools from all over the country, we made our arguments philosophically. Now, we certainly have theological convictions regarding a lot of the issues that we addressed, but you can't just go into a setting that's pluralistic and start quoting chapters and verses from scripture to defend your position. You'll be ignored.

You need to be able to make your arguments philosophically. So, I think as Christians in a pluralistic society, this is something that we just have to do. We need to be

aware of philosophical arguments, pros and cons, as well as our theological and biblical reasons for the views that we espouse.

So, we're going to take a two-step approach here, beginning with a kind of review and assessment of major moral theories and philosophical concepts, looking at theories like utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, social contract ethics, and virtue ethics. Then, we'll look at a couple of important theological traditions and ethics, divine command theory, and natural law ethics. Then, once we've done all that, we will apply those theoretical concepts to particular moral issues.

As we survey the major moral theories and principles, I'll highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each theory, not just the philosophical theories but also the theological traditions as well. Each has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. I will offer a kind of eclectic model for thinking about moral theories and principles from a Christian point of view.

I happen to believe that all or at least many of the major philosophical traditions and ethics have significant insights that we need to attend to. So, I'll explain that eclectic model once we're done with our survey of moral theories. Then, we'll discuss the major moral issues, noting important philosophical and theological arguments on both sides of these issues.

And we'll consider a number of biblical passages and theological arguments that are pertinent to each issue, again, on either side of each issue. So that's the plan and I hope you enjoy and learn much from our discussion.

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