

# **Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 9, Eclectic Models of Christian Ethics**

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 9, Eclectic Models of Christian Ethics.

Okay, so having completed our survey of major philosophical and theological theories of Christian Ethics, the question is, to which of these theories should we subscribe as Christians? My view that I would recommend is a kind of eclectic approach that affirms the insights of many of these theories.

Here is a graphic that represents the eclectic model that I recommend, which affirms the insights, especially of utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and virtue ethics. As we see here, we have three major aspects of moral theory or insights that we gain from particular moral and theoretical traditions that I believe need to be affirmed and recognized in any Christian Ethic. One of those concerns is about utility and consequences that pertain to especially the pleasurable or painful outcomes of the actions that we perform.

Duty, the deontological component, considerations of things like obligation, justice, and rights, that's indispensable, I would argue. Virtue, which refers to character traits like courage, generosity, patience, kindness, and self-control, is what the Apostle Paul calls the fruit of the spirit. And we see in Scripture repeated references to all three of these domains of ethics.

In Old Testament case law all the way through the New Testament, there is repeated attention to the consequences of our actions. And even if the utility of those actions, as Bentham would put it, is not explicitly discussed, there's still a lot of attention in scripture to the consequences of our actions and how our conduct affects other people. There's also a lot of attention to deontological concerns, lots of rules and commands in scripture, and lots of references to rights, justice, and obligations.

So that's certainly an important emphasis in scripture. And again, when it comes to virtue, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, a lot of endorsement and exhortation to act virtuously. Again, Paul uses the metaphor of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians.

So, all of these are important aspects of a complete Christian ethic because they're also emphasized in scripture. So, we can also note that all three of these aspects of a complete moral theory are fulfilled or represented in the life and character of Jesus Christ. So, Jesus fulfilled all three of these domains.

He was perfectly obedient to the law. Everything that he did, you might say, maximized the good and had maximal benefits for people in terms of the consequences of his actions and his words. And he perfectly displayed all of the virtues, all of the fruit of the spirit.

So, I would argue that any moral theory that we could or may call Christian needs to incorporate all of these elements. Any theory that focuses exclusively on one of these moral considerations is basically a truncated Christian ethic, an incomplete Christian ethic. It also invites us to see all of the insights of these major moral theories, even though they come from secular philosophers, as genuine insights into Christian truth.

As it happens, the major proponents of each of these theories were believers in God. In the case of Kant, for example, and John Harris made the case, this is true of John Stuart Mill as well; they maintained that you really can't do ethics rightly without God. It was certainly Kant's claim that there are three things that are absolutely essential for the possibility of morality: God, freedom, and immortality.

Without God, we have no judge, and we have no one who will hold us accountable to the moral law. Without immortality, then there is no survival to face judgment and to be held accountable. And without freedom, morality is impossible because if you're not free to some significant degree, you can't be responsible for your actions.

At any rate, for Kant, God is absolutely crucial for the possibility of morality. And Aristotle also was a theist of sorts. When it comes to Aristotle and his view of causality, particularly teleological causes, one could argue that his ethic ultimately depends upon God.

So again, there's my graphic, there's the cross in the middle there, not intended to look like a dagger, but that's again meant to communicate the idea that Christ fulfilled all three of these domains and embodies all moral truth. So that's my eclectic analysis of the nature of the moral good. We can also talk about the sources of ethical knowledge, and I think an eclectic approach here is helpful as well.

Ultimately, when we're talking about ethics, we're talking about the moral will of God, which, as we've already seen when we've talked about the Euthyphro problem, that the nature of God is definitive of moral truth. So, how does God make his moral truth known to us? How does he communicate to us what moral truth is? Here, I think we can affirm the insights of both natural law ethics and divine command ethics. So, God makes known his moral will to us through natural law, through primary and secondary precepts that we can read off of nature and our own bodies as it were.

But also, he communicates to us through special revelation, especially in the books of the Old and New Testaments. Now, I would go further and say that natural law, through God's natural prescriptions that he has woven into the fabric of nature, communicates to us in the form of truths about utility. What sorts of actions are more likely to bring about good consequences and also communicate to us through a sense of duty?

And that, many would argue, John Calvin would argue, many of those in the Calvinist tradition may take the form of a kind of natural sense or awareness of God, which he calls the *sensus divinitatis*. The kind of judicial sentiment and conscience that God has given us makes us generally aware of basic oughts and duties and obligations that we have.

Thirdly, through the domain of virtue, character traits that we tend to admire, we find people who are generous and kind and courageous, more attractive, and our kind of natural admiration of people who have these virtues.

I think that could be construed as a kind of outworking of God's making his moral will known to us through natural law. And then finally, in terms of special revelation and how God's moral will is communicated to us in that form, I think it's helpful to note that there are lots of different ways that God communicates to us moral truth in scripture. The biblical texts take a variety of forms.

We have historical works, poetic works, apocalyptic works, and prophetic narratives in scripture. Lots of literary forms we find among the biblical texts. In the narratives, we find a lot of clear communication regarding what sorts of behaviors tend to produce what sorts of results, good and bad, beneficial and harmful, which lines up with insights about moral utility.

And then we have all these commands in scripture, again, which line up with duty and other deontological concepts like obligation and rights. Then, we have various character portraits from scripture. As we study particular individuals and their character traits, we can have our understanding of virtue expanded and filled out significantly.

If we do a character study of, say, David or Moses or Elijah, especially Jesus. On the darker side, we also have all sorts of sinister characters in scripture, such as Haman and Judas Iscariot, the Egyptian pharaoh who opposed Moses, Pontius Pilate, and Herod. And we learn a lot more about vices by studying those characters.

So, those three dimensions of biblical revelation further enhance our understanding of utility, duty, and virtue. So that's my eclectic model of Christian ethics.

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