

# Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7, Divine Command Ethics Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## 1. Abstract of Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7, Divine Command Ethics, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. James S. Spiegel's lecture on Christian Ethics, Session 7, focuses on **Divine Command Theory**, which posits that actions are moral because God commands them. The lecture explores this theory by contrasting it with other ethical frameworks and introducing the **Euthyphro Dilemma**, a philosophical challenge questioning whether God commands something because it's good or if it's good because God commands it. **Various responses to this dilemma are examined**, including those of Swinburne and Aquinas, who argue that God's commands reflect either necessary moral truths or His inherent nature. **Finally, the lecture touches on Peter Geach's perspective**, suggesting some moral knowledge exists independently of divine revelation, a viewpoint aligning more closely with natural law ethics, which will be discussed in the subsequent session.

**2. 11 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Apologetics → Christian Ethics).**



**Spiegel\_XnEthics\_Session07.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7, Divine Command Ethics

#### Briefing Document: Divine Command Theory in Christian Ethics

**Overview:** This document summarizes Dr. James S. Spiegel's lecture on Divine Command Theory (DCT) within the context of Christian ethics. The lecture introduces DCT as a theological approach to morality, contrasts it with secular ethical theories, outlines its core tenets, presents the classic Euthyphro Dilemma as a key challenge, and explores various Christian responses to this dilemma, including those of Swinburne, Aquinas, and Geach.

#### Main Themes and Important Ideas:

##### 1. Definition and Core Tenets of Divine Command Theory:

- DCT posits that the rightness or wrongness of actions is solely determined by God's commands.
- Scripture is presented as the primary source of these divine commands, ranging from general principles (e.g., loving God and neighbor) to specific rules (e.g., Levitical case laws, Pauline exhortations).
- Spiegel emphasizes the "binding effect" of divine commands, linking the concept of "obligation" to the Latin term "legare," meaning "to bind." He states, *"Divine commands impose obligations in the sense that they bind us to whatever God's standard is."*
- He notes the intuitive appeal of DCT to many Christians who instinctively consult scripture to determine the moral course of action on various issues.

##### 2. The Euthyphro Dilemma as a Challenge to DCT:

- The lecture introduces the Euthyphro Dilemma, originating from Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro, as a long-standing critique of DCT.
- The dilemma is framed as a choice between two problematic options:
- **Option 1: God commands something because it is good.** This implies that goodness exists independently of God's will, undermining the central claim of DCT. *"If they love it because it's good, that shows there's something else besides the gods loving that made it good."*

- **Option 2: Something is good because God commands it.** This raises the question of why God commands what He does, potentially leading to the conclusion that God's commands are arbitrary. *"If it's good because it's loving, if it's good because they love it, then the question is, well, why do they love it?"*
- Spiegel highlights the controversial implication of the second horn, noting that it could suggest God could have commanded seemingly immoral acts like rape or torture and they would then be considered good. *"He could have commanded rape, he could have commanded torture, he could have commanded child abuse, and all those things would be good. But he just so happens to have commanded the things that he did."*

### 3. Responses to the Euthyphro Dilemma:

- **Richard Swinburne's Distinction Between Necessary and Contingent Moral Truths:**
- Swinburne attempts to resolve the dilemma by differentiating between moral truths that are necessarily good in all possible worlds (e.g., act justly, be truthful) and those that are contingently good because God specifically commands them in certain contexts (e.g., paying a specific debt).
- Spiegel expresses his lack of enthusiasm for this approach. *"That's Swinburne's way of dealing with it. I'm not a big fan of that."*
- **Thomas Aquinas' Solution Based on God's Nature:**
- Aquinas argues that God commands what He commands not arbitrarily but because it reflects His inherent nature. *"His way of dealing with this is to say that God commands the things he commands not because of the nature of the actions but because of who he is. It is his nature that is the standard for goodness."*
- According to this view, God's commands are epistemological, revealing His nature and informing us about what is morally true. *"The purpose of biblical commands is not to create certain moral truths. These moral truths are eternal. The purpose of biblical commands is epistemological, to inform us as to what is morally true and good."*
- Spiegel finds this approach more compelling.
- **Peter Geach's Perspective on Preceding Moral Knowledge:**

- Geach contends that not all moral knowledge depends on knowing God. He argues that we must use philosophical and moral reasoning to evaluate alleged divine revelations. *"He maintains that not all moral knowledge depends on the knowledge of God because he says any alleged divine revelations must be evaluated in moral terms, philosophically, in order for us to recognize that that is a plausible communication from God."*
- Geach suggests that a basic understanding of right and wrong (natural law) precedes and informs our interpretation of scripture. He states that the "general undesirability of certain acts like lying, infanticide, adultery... is itself a promulgation of the divine law absolutely forbidding such practices," even for those who do not believe in God.
- Spiegel notes that Geach's view aligns more with natural law ethics, which will be discussed in the subsequent session.

#### **4. The Purpose of Biblical Commands (According to the Thomistic View):**

- Biblical commands are not seen as creating moral truths but rather as revealing pre-existing, eternal moral truths rooted in God's nature. *"Biblical commands are essentially epistemological. They don't create moral truths, and they don't report to us what some of the standards above God have told us. No, they're reporting to us the implications of the divine nature for our various modes of conduct."*

#### **Conclusion:**

Dr. Spiegel's lecture provides a foundational understanding of Divine Command Theory as a significant approach within Christian ethics. While acknowledging its intuitive appeal and scriptural basis, the lecture highlights the critical challenge posed by the Euthyphro Dilemma. It then explores different theological responses to this challenge, contrasting Swinburne's distinction of moral truths with Aquinas' emphasis on God's nature as the standard of goodness, and finally presenting Geach's perspective on the role of pre-existing moral knowledge. The lecture sets the stage for the subsequent discussion on natural law ethics by indicating the overlap in Geach's viewpoint.

## 4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7, Divine Command Ethics

### Divine Command Theory: A Study Guide

#### Quiz

1. Briefly explain the core tenet of Divine Command Theory. According to this theory, what is the ultimate basis for determining whether an action is right or wrong?
2. Provide two examples from the provided text illustrating the range of divine commands found in scripture. Differentiate between the types of commands you have identified.
3. Explain the significance of the Latin root of the word "obligation" in the context of Divine Command Theory. How does this etymology relate to the idea of divine commands?
4. Describe the Euthyphro Dilemma as presented in the text. What are the two options it poses for divine command theorists, and why are both considered "unsavory"?
5. According to the text, what is the Muslim perspective on why God commands certain actions? What potential problem does the text raise with this viewpoint?
6. How does contemporary philosopher Richard Swinburne attempt to resolve the Euthyphro Dilemma? Briefly explain the distinction he makes regarding moral truths.
7. Explain Thomas Aquinas's approach to the Euthyphro Dilemma. What does he argue is the basis for God's commands, and what is the purpose of these commands?
8. According to Aquinas, do biblical commands create moral truths? If not, what is their primary function in relation to morality?
9. Summarize Peter Geach's perspective on the relationship between moral knowledge and the knowledge of God. What is his reasoning for this view?
10. How does Geach's viewpoint connect with the concept of "natural law ethics" as mentioned in the text? What is the implication of this connection?

#### Answer Key

1. Divine Command Theory asserts that the rightness or wrongness of an action is solely determined by whether God commands or forbids it. Essentially, an action is morally correct simply because God says so.
2. The text provides examples of both general commands, such as "love the Lord your God with all your heart," and specific commands found in books like Leviticus concerning particular situations like dealing with molds or bodily emissions. The former are broad moral principles, while the latter are detailed rules for specific contexts.
3. The Latin root "legare" of "obligation" means "to bind." This is significant in Divine Command Theory because it illustrates the idea that divine commands create a binding duty upon believers. Just as an obligation binds a person to a commitment, divine commands bind individuals to God's moral standards.
4. The Euthyphro Dilemma asks: "Does God command something because it is good, or is something good because God commands it?" The first option implies a standard of goodness independent of God, undermining the theory. The second suggests that morality is arbitrary, as God could have commanded heinous acts.
5. The text states that Muslims might argue God purely and simply commands what he does, and whatever he commands becomes righteous by virtue of that command. The potential problem raised is that this seems to imply that acts like rape or child abuse could have been considered good if God had commanded them, which many find morally repugnant.
6. Richard Swinburne distinguishes between necessary and contingent moral truths. He suggests that God commands necessary moral truths (like acting justly) because they are inherently good. However, contingent moral truths (like paying a specific debt) are good because God specifically commands them in particular circumstances.
7. Aquinas argues that God commands what he commands not arbitrarily but because of his own nature. God's nature is the standard for goodness, and his commands reveal what his nature implies for various situations. Therefore, God's commands make his inherent goodness known to humanity.
8. According to Aquinas, biblical commands do not create moral truths; these truths are eternal and rooted in God's nature. Instead, the primary function of biblical commands is epistemological – to inform us about what is already morally true based on God's character.

9. Peter Geach argues that not all moral knowledge depends on the knowledge of God. He believes that individuals possess certain philosophical and moral intuitions that they use to evaluate alleged divine revelations. He suggests that we bring a pre-existing moral framework to our understanding of scripture.
10. Geach's view aligns with natural law ethics, which posits that there is a moral order accessible through human reason, independent of divine revelation. His idea that we have innate moral awareness that helps us assess scripture echoes the natural law concept of a law "written on our hearts."

### **Essay Format Questions**

1. Critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Divine Command Theory as a system of ethics. Consider its appeal to believers and the philosophical challenges it faces, such as the Euthyphro Dilemma.
2. Compare and contrast the solutions to the Euthyphro Dilemma offered by Swinburne and Aquinas. Which approach do you find more compelling, and why?
3. Explore the implications of accepting Divine Command Theory for moral reasoning and decision-making in everyday life. How might a divine command theorist approach complex ethical issues?
4. Discuss Peter Geach's critique of Divine Command Theory. How does his perspective, rooted in natural law, challenge the central claims of Divine Command Theory regarding the source of moral knowledge?
5. Evaluate the argument that grounding morality in divine commands provides a more objective and authoritative ethical framework compared to other ethical theories discussed prior to Divine Command Theory (utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, social contract theory).

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Divine Command Theory:** The ethical theory that states that the morality of an action is determined solely by whether it is commanded or forbidden by God.
- **Euthyphro Dilemma:** A philosophical problem presented by Plato, questioning whether something is pious (good) because the gods love it, or whether the gods love it because it is pious (good). In the context of Divine Command Theory, it asks if God commands something because it is good, or if something is good because God commands it.
- **Obligation:** A course of action that someone is required to take due to a moral or legal duty. The root term "legare" means "to bind."
- **Necessary Moral Truth:** According to Swinburne, a moral truth that is true in all possible worlds and could not be otherwise.
- **Contingent Moral Truth:** According to Swinburne, a moral truth that is true because of specific facts about the world.
- **Epistemological:** Relating to the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. In the context of Aquinas's view, it refers to the idea that divine commands inform us about existing moral truths.
- **Natural Law Ethics:** The ethical theory that there are universal moral principles inherent in human nature and discoverable through reason, independent of divine revelation.
- **Impiety:** Lack of reverence for God or sacred things; unrighteousness.
- **Promulgation:** The formal declaration or making known of a law or doctrine.



## 5. FAQs on Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7, Divine Command Ethics, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions: Divine Command Theory

**1. What is Divine Command Theory (DCT)?** Divine Command Theory is the theological view that morality is based directly on God's commands. According to this theory, an action is right or wrong simply because God has declared it to be so. These commands can range from broad principles like loving God and neighbor to specific rules found in religious texts such as the Bible. The core idea is that God's pronouncements create moral obligations, binding individuals to His standards.

**2. Why is DCT a significant ethical framework for some religious believers?** DCT resonates with many religious believers, particularly Christians, because it grounds morality in the authority of God. When faced with ethical dilemmas, the initial instinct for many is to consult scripture or religious teachings to discern God's will on the matter. This approach sees God as the ultimate moral legislator, and His commands provide a clear and authoritative guide for conduct, offering a seemingly straightforward way to determine right and wrong in various situations.

**3. What is the Euthyphro Dilemma and how does it challenge Divine Command Theory?** The Euthyphro Dilemma, originally posed by Plato, challenges DCT by presenting a seemingly irreconcilable choice: "Does God command something because it is good, or is something good because God commands it?" If God commands something because it is already good, then goodness exists independently of God, undermining the central tenet of DCT. If something is good simply because God commands it, then morality appears arbitrary. God could, hypothetically, command actions that are widely considered wrong (like rape or torture), and DCT would seemingly have to deem them good, which many find morally repugnant.

**4. How have philosophers attempted to resolve the Euthyphro Dilemma in the context of DCT?** Several approaches have been proposed to address the Euthyphro Dilemma. Richard Swinburne suggests differentiating between necessary moral truths (intrinsically good actions like being just) and contingent moral truths (actions good because God specifically commands them in certain contexts). Thomas Aquinas argued that God commands actions not arbitrarily, but in accordance with His own inherently good nature. Thus, God's commands reflect and communicate His eternal and perfect character, making Him the standard for goodness.

**5. According to the Thomistic view, what is the role of biblical commands in morality?**

In Aquinas' view, biblical commands are not what create moral truths; rather, these moral truths are eternal and rooted in God's nature. The purpose of biblical commands is epistemological – they serve to inform humanity about what is already morally true and good by revealing the implications of God's divine nature for human conduct. When God commands not to murder, it reflects His nature as life-giving and just, not an arbitrary decree that suddenly made murder wrong.

**6. What is Peter Geach's perspective on the relationship between moral knowledge and the knowledge of God?**

Peter Geach, a Catholic philosopher, argues that not all moral knowledge is dependent on knowing God. He contends that individuals possess certain philosophical and moral intuitions that precede and are used to evaluate any alleged divine revelation. According to Geach, our ability to recognize scriptural teachings as plausibly coming from God relies on a pre-existing moral framework. He suggests that the inherent wrongness of acts like lying or infanticide is a promulgation of divine law recognizable even without explicit belief in God, aligning with natural law ethics.

**7. How does the concept of "obligation" relate to Divine Command Theory?** Divine Command Theory posits that God's commands create moral obligations. The very term "obligation" is rooted in the Latin word "legare," meaning "to bind." Divine commands, therefore, "bind" individuals to God's standards, creating a sense of duty. Believers feel "duty-bound" to follow God's instructions, understanding these commands as requirements for righteous living and pleasing God.

**8. What are some potential criticisms or challenges beyond the Euthyphro Dilemma that Divine Command Theory might face?**

Beyond the Euthyphro Dilemma, DCT can face other criticisms. One concern revolves around the interpretation of divine commands, as religious texts can be complex and open to various interpretations, potentially leading to conflicting moral conclusions. Another challenge involves the question of how to ascertain God's commands accurately and avoid the influence of personal biases or cultural norms in their interpretation. Furthermore, for those who do not believe in God or a specific religious text, DCT offers no inherent moral authority or justification for its claims.