

# **Roots, Shoots and Fruits: character, commands and consequences in biblical ethics**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses upon ethical issues, the challenges to Christian faith and witness in the present postmodern culture. It notes how with the present generation, there has been a shift towards moral relativism, with the State protecting the rights of autonomous individuals to choose their own path in life. In such a society there is a need for clarity about the nature of biblical ethics and its relationship to the gospel and the mission of the Church. This article provides a brief historical overview of ethical theories, which are grouped into three major types, depending on whether their primary concern is the character of the person, duties to which the person is bound, or consequences of the person's actions. It aims to provide a biblically faithful framework for approaching ethical issues, using the image of a fruit tree which is developed in a way that integrates virtue, deontological and consequentialist concerns. Reference is made to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and Paul's ethical teaching in Ephesians 5. Good roots in the character of God, can, through obedience to the Scriptures, produce good shoots which can result in good fruits, for the glory of God and the good of others.

**KEY WORDS:** Postmodern culture, Biblical ethics, the character of God, obedience to the law, the Spirit.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary Europe, ethical issues are among the greatest challenges to Christian faith and witness. Most obviously in the area of sexual ethics, there is a clear divergence between the values of the predominant culture and the policies of nation states and traditional Christian ethics. Throughout the modern period, from the sixteenth century onwards, ethical standards were broadly agreed between Christians and non-believers. The predominant idea was that certain behaviours are inherently wrong because they are contrary either to God's law (for orthodox Christians) or the nature of things (for Deists and atheists). Things changed during the twentieth century with the declining influence of Christianity, the growing influence of critical theory with its suspicion of power,

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and the emergence of a radicalised individualism that sees the autonomous self as supreme in morality.

This ‘postmodern’ turn rejects the idea that absolute moral principles can be known with certainty, arguing instead that all moral judgements are culturally conditioned. From moral absolutism – there are standards of right and wrong that apply to everyone in all circumstances – the predominant culture, especially among younger generations, has shifted towards moral relativism – what is right for you may not be right for me. The role of the State is not to promote a vision of the good, but to protect the rights of autonomous individuals to choose their own path in life. The only absolute standard, although there is no clear explanation as to why it should be an absolute when all other absolutes are rejected, is that no one should interfere with another person’s freedom. By this measure, some of the things that Christians regard as great evils, such as murder, rape and abuse, are still recognised as wrong, but any actions, words and, increasingly, even attitudes that are construed as judging actions between consenting adults as morally wrong can be added to the list of major evils.

Buffeted by this powerful cultural wind, some professing Christians and churches are departing from biblical sexual morality. They claim that Christian ethics boils down to love and it is unloving to deny others love. Other Christians, whilst holding to a biblical position, are toning down their language around ethical issues. They fear the legal consequences and loss of influence that might result if they speak clearly and prefer to focus on the ‘gospel’ in their engagement with culture rather than on morality. A third group is not afraid to be countercultural and to speak clearly, but sometimes struggles to know how to frame ethical decision making on issues concerning which there is no clear biblical command. These are challenging times for individual believers as they seek to be faithful to God and for the Church as it seeks to bear testimony to the truth.

In this moment, then, the need for clarity about the nature of biblical ethics and its relationship to the gospel and the mission of the Church is urgent. This article aims to provide a biblically faithful framework for approaching ethical issues, using the image of a fruit tree.

### THREE SCHOOLS OF ETHICS

Ethical theories can be grouped into three major types, depending on whether their primary concern is the character of the person, duties to which the person is bound, or consequences of the person’s actions.

The first ‘school’, **virtue ethics**, has long historical roots, being especially associated with the Greek philosopher Plato in the fourth century BC, who described four main qualities of character that later came to be known as the ‘cardinal virtues’: prudence, courage, temperance and justice. The primary concern of virtue ethics is with character: good people do good things. Actions that express and promote good character are moral. Perhaps the most obvious problems for virtue ethics are that virtues are general and non-specific. They may set a broad standard that can influence our actions, but they aren’t easily applied to challenging ethical questions and we may end up with different views about what a righteous person would do in any given situation.

The second school, known as **deontological ethics** (from the Greek *deon*, ‘duty’), is concerned with standards of right to which people ought to conform. Such duties could derive either from laws given by the Creator (divine command) or simply from the nature of things. Deontological ethics is attractive in its appeal to a standard that is external to the individual, but it raises the intractable problem of the origin of morality. How can universal rules exist, and how can we know them with certainty? It is true that certain moral standards seem to be common across cultures and innate in human nature, as cultural studies and developmental research demonstrate, but how can we be certain that these are universal and what about those people within any cultural grouping who reject a standard that is generally accepted? More importantly, how does the fact that something reflects the nature of things turn into a duty to align oneself with it? How does an ‘is’ become an ‘ought’ if there is no one to hold the person to account, no lawgiver and judge?

The third school, **consequentialist ethics**, is concerned primarily with the results of actions.<sup>2</sup> An action is deemed to be good if it has positive consequences. This approach raises some obvious questions. In a world of variability and uncertainty, how can we know with enough certainty what will result from our actions to make a judgement? What period of time should we measure the outcomes over? Should we be concerned with consequences simply for ourselves, for those within our group or for everyone? Is it legitimate to derive some ethical rules from judgements about consequences, or must we simply test every single action for its likely outcomes? And, perhaps most importantly, which outcomes do we judge to be good? Most consequentialist ethicists have thought in terms of outcomes of actions for everyone – a perspective known as Utilitarianism, which inevitably involves weighing up positive outcomes for

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<sup>2</sup> Some theorists use the term teleological ethics, from the Greek *telos* (‘end’), in much the same way as I speak here of consequentialist ethics. Others, however, use the concept of teleology to refer not to the outcomes of the action but the motivation from which it springs (the intention behind it), which is closer to virtue ethics than consequentialism.

some against negative outcomes for others – but there is no agreement over what we should be measuring to know what outcome is ‘good’. Should we aim to maximise pleasure alone or should we include other qualities that may conflict with pleasure but seem instinctively to most people to be right (such as loyalty to a spouse)?

This brief historical overview of ethical theories goes some way to explaining why contemporary culture has seen a shift from agreed standards of morality. Deontological ethics only makes sense if we believe there are universal standards of morality that can be known reliably. Postmodernism rejects the idea of certainty of knowledge and there can be no ‘ought’ in ethics other than the principle of harming no one else without a lawgiver and judge who is above the competing interests of individuals. Why should it matter to an individual if something is deemed by others to be good, or even right? Why should the individual feel compelled to conform to it if no one else is hurt?

### *Biblical ethics*

Having surveyed ethical theories, we now turn our focus to biblical ethics. Which of the three schools of ethics does a biblical approach fall into? Perhaps most Christians would, until recently at least, have said it must be the deontological school. After all, the Bible contains rules and codes of duties. The Old Testament, especially, records many commandments from God that were binding on Israel and careful students of the New Testament rightly recognise that, while not all of those commands are binding on Christian believers, many are repeated. Indeed, a biblical understanding of God demands that there must be a standard of ethical behaviour that is consistent throughout the Testaments because God is unchanging. Moral standards are not arbitrary – they do not become right just because God says them – but reflect the character of the eternal God who alone is good – He commands them because that is who He is.

At this point, however, we cross the line into a different ethical school. The mention of the character of God suggests that biblical ethics have something to do with virtue. Indeed, throughout much of Christian history, from Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth, virtue ethics was probably the dominant school. The connection between the character of God and the behaviour of his people is clear in the Old Testament law, which repeatedly calls Israel to be holy because God is holy,<sup>3</sup> in the expectation of the prophets that God’s people would have transformed hearts, and in the New Testament epistles, especially those of the apostle Paul, which expect growth in Christlike character by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> See Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7.

The ethical school that may appear most at variance with the Bible is consequentialism. Some liberal theologians have suggested that the New Testament emphasis on love leads towards a Utilitarian ethic. American Joseph Fletcher, for example, argued that Christ's command to love others is the only duty binding on the Christian and the right course of action in every situation is what will be the most loving outcome (the ends justifies the means.<sup>4</sup> From this starting point, Fletcher argued that abortion, euthanasia and eugenics may be acceptable. Those who hold to a high view of Scripture rightly reject such thinking, but in reacting against it they should not neglect the fact that biblical ethics has something to do with consequences. Love is not, as Fletcher claimed, the only command in Scripture that is binding on the Christian, but the command to love cannot be fulfilled without considering the impact of our actions on others.

Biblical ethics, then, cannot be reduced to just one of the three schools. Scripture integrates the emphases of each into a holistic ethic that is concerned with godly character, obedience to divine rules and thoughtfulness about the impact of our actions. Indeed, these three aspects are often found within the same biblical passages. In what follows, I will consider two– the 'Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew 5-7 and Paul's ethical teaching in Ephesians 5.

One of the most famous sayings of Jesus is His version of the so-called 'Golden Rule', towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which commands his followers to, "do to others what you would have them do to you".<sup>5</sup> This principle cannot be applied without considering the consequences of our actions and how others will feel about them. It would, however, be wrong to suggest on this basis that Jesus was a consequentialist. The sermon that contains this principle begins with Jesus saying that He had not come, "to abolish the Law or the Prophets [...] but to fulfil them".<sup>6</sup> Indeed, He described the Golden Rule as summing up the Law and the Prophets. For Jesus, the commands of the Law were inseparable from the need for careful evaluation of the impact of one's actions. Between these two statements, the Sermon on the Mount also contains Jesus' restatement in distinctively Christian terms of the Old Testament call for God's people to be holy because God is holy: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect".<sup>7</sup> Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, then, includes elements of virtue, duty and consequences in His ethical standard.

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<sup>4</sup> J.F. Fletcher. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 7:12.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:17

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:48

We find these same three elements in Ephesians 5, where Paul begins with a virtue approach (“Be imitators of God [...] and live a life of love”, verses 1-2), then adopts a deontological approach by listing things the believers must not do (verses 3 and 4), before charging them to live wisely in every situation (verses 15-17), which must entail a consequentialist approach. Indeed, this is the consistent shape of Pauline ethics: a godly person (character), obeys God’s commands (duty) and lives wisely in every situation (considering the consequences of one’s actions).<sup>8</sup> Paul knew that the Christian is free in Christ, but this freedom must be used to maximise the glory of God (love for God) and the good of others (love for others).<sup>9</sup>

### *Roots, Shoots and Fruits*

I have argued that Scripture expects us to integrate the three ways of approaching ethics into a whole.<sup>10</sup> I suggest the image of a fruit tree as a metaphor for what this may look like. This picture is, of course, influenced by the Scriptures. The righteous person is depicted in Psalm 1 as, “a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season”, the Lord Jesus likened the disciple to a fruitful branch abiding in the vine, and the apostle Paul described the qualities the Spirit produces in believers as fruit.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I will develop this image in a way that integrates virtue, deontological and consequentialist concerns considered as the roots, shoots and fruits of biblical ethics.

The purpose of the tree – its *telos* – is to bear fruit that glorifies God and blesses others. In order to achieve this purpose, it needs deep roots in the right soil and a strong and healthy trunk and branches (shoots) that can support the weight of the fruit. This is an image of organic growth in us as we depend on the transforming and empowering work of the Spirit in our lives, who may be

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<sup>8</sup> I suggest that in this logical flow, Paul is merely following the flow of the Old Testament from God’s self-revelation to the Patriarchs in loving covenant, confirmed in the redemption from Egypt, to the giving of the law through Moses, and the provision of wisdom literature to show the expansive application of the fear of God to righteous living in all of life within the limits set by the law and the prophetic books to show Israel how both departure from covenant loyalty and reduction of the law to a minimalistic standard attract divine judgement.

<sup>9</sup> See Galatians 5:13-15 and Paul’s treatment of issues over which Christians differ in Romans 14, where he calls them to limit their own freedom willingly for the sake of others and to do everything to honour God and avoid harming a brother.

<sup>10</sup> I am not alone in claiming that Christian ethics integrates the concerns of the three schools of ethics. For other proposals along these lines see: John M. Frame, John M. (2008) *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship Volume 3, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 33ff; David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus on Contemporary Context*, second edn., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 80; David W. Jones. *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, B&H Studies in Christian Ethics, (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 20ff.; C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 1:3; John 15; Galatians 5:22-23

likened to the water that flows through the tree. The Spirit never works, however without the Word – gospel truth revealed in Scripture – and we need the Bible in every aspect of this ethical process.

The **soil** in which biblical ethics grows is the **character of God**. Biblical ethics rests in the person and nature of the God who created and is sovereign over the universe. Moral behaviour reflects the character of God. Our **priorities** should be the same as God's – as creatures in His image we are meant to represent Him to all creation, living in loving relationship with God and our fellow human beings. If we could always know what it means to love God and others and always acted in keeping with that knowledge, we would be sinless. In reality, however, sin has clouded our understanding and judgement. We can read Scripture and understand what God is like, but if we are to become like God, we need the Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Christ, from glory to glory.<sup>12</sup> We must put off the sinful nature and put on Christ. It is love that binds all other Christian virtues together in perfect unity.<sup>13</sup> At this level, Christian ethics are **virtue ethics**. Our aim is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ – to have God's law written on our hearts, as the new covenant promises,<sup>14</sup> so we act in a way that reflects God's likeness and embodies love. We need the **Scriptures** to reveal God's character to us **and** the **Spirit** to transform us. **Good actions are godly** – consistent with God's character and motivated by love for God first and then for others.

From the root of God's character grows the **shoots** of a life dedicated to God's will. As the shoot grows, it needs the support and guidance of God's **commands**, which provide **principles** by which we must live, keeping us on the right track in our understanding of what love for God and others entails. Until Christ returns in glory, when we shall be transformed to be perfectly like Him,<sup>15</sup> we are still prone to deception, to selfish desires and to sin. We need greater clarity from God as to how we ought to live. For this reason, God gave His Law to Israel and the commands of Christ and the apostles to us. Growing from the roots of virtues that reflect God's character, then, Christian ethics has a **deontological** dimension in God's will for His people revealed in Scripture. We need the **Scriptures** to know God's law **and** the **Spirit** to motivate us to want to obey it. **Good actions are obedient** – in line with God's revealed will as outlined in the New Testament (we can also learn from the Old Testament Law but must consider how Christ's coming changes our relationship to it).

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 3:14

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 8:10

<sup>15</sup> 1 John 3:2

From the shoots grow the **fruits** of obedient living in the everyday decisions we must make in given situations. The issues at stake here are our **conduct** and the **power** by which we can live faithfully for God. The consistent scriptural emphasis on our part within a larger community of God's people means that we must consider the consequences not only for ourselves but for others. Wisdom is known by the fact that it leads to maximal blessing for others and glory for God. Thus, Christian ethics builds on **virtue** and **duty** a final **consequentialist** dimension. We are not, however, abandoned to our own reason in deciding what to do or not to do. We need the **Scriptures** to show us examples of others who have been foolish or wise in similar situations **and** the **Spirit** to guide our steps in each choice to follow His will rather than our desires (Galatians 5:16-25). **Good actions are wise** – in step with the Spirit, in each specific situation seeking to bless others and bring glory to God.

In summary, then, good actions are godly (reflecting the character of Christ and motivated by love for God and others), obedient (fulfilling the commands of God in Scripture) and wise (aware of their consequences and acting always to maximise the glory of God and the good of others). Good fruit grows from good shoots that emerge from good roots. This image helps us to understand not only what is good, but also how we can do what is good. It also reminds us that we need the Word and the Spirit to be righteous. It also provides a simple scheme for ethical decision making. When faced with a decision, I can ask three questions: what is my motivation and how does it reflect Christ-likeness?; what is biblically permissible for me to do or say?; and what maximises God's glory and the good of others? All three must be correct for my action to be moral. Or, put in terms of our image of the tree: which courses of action are rooted in God's character?; which options are consistent with the commands of God that shape righteousness in the shoots of my life?; and which option within these would produce most fruit for God? These three aspects are all important and interdependent. We cannot claim to acting in relationship to God, or led by the Spirit, if we are disobedient to Scripture or the consequences of our actions, although not prohibited in Scripture, are destructive. Nor can we claim to be faithful to Scripture if we have a dry obedience that does not flow from and enhance to joyful relationship with God and seek always to do the good we can do as well as avoid wrongdoing. And we cannot claim to be wise and fruitful if we are not people who fear and love God and whose lives are shaped by and obedient to the commands of God in the Bible.

### *Ethics, Gospel and Mission*

Returning to the concern with which this article began, the image of the fruit tree can help us avoid two dangers related to the mission of making the gospel known to others. The first danger is that we become moralisers who think that the faith



is all about ethics. Non-Christian religions may be primarily about ethical guidance for moral living, but the heart of Christianity is not ethics but the message of redemption from sin.<sup>16</sup> We are not called to be preachers of morality, but of Christ crucified for our salvation. In our mission to the world, we must not be known as people who primarily pronounce judgement in wrongdoing, but who point to the supreme right-doer, the Lord Jesus Christ, who became the right-maker through His death and resurrection. This message must, of course, be supported by our reputation as doers of good.<sup>17</sup> This is more important than ever in a postmodern age when there is such sensitivity to hypocrisy and claims to truth are heard as oppressive claims to power.

At the same time, however, we must avoid the second danger, which is to stop speaking about morality. Ethics is not separate from, or an add-on to, the gospel. Rather, ethics reveals what sin is and what faithful living for God looks like. There is no gospel without both of these dimensions and we must not proclaim a message that does not expose sin and call people to righteousness. To be biblical, gospel people (evangelical), we must recognise that the ethic of godliness is not separate from the gospel, but its fruit. I suggest that this means we must be very careful not to dismiss the implications of the gospel spelt out in the New Testament epistles as merely ‘cultural’ or ‘situational’ unless the divinely-inspired author makes it clear that is what they are. The gospel creates its own ethic and culture. This is, perhaps, the biggest temptation for the Church in our moment – not so much that we will start behaving as if sin doesn’t matter, but that we will stop speaking as if it does. If we do, however, it will be only a matter of time before our actions follow our words.

In our mission, therefore, we must be clear in proclaiming biblical truth with grace. It will be vital that we are consistent in applying biblical ethics to all aspects of life so that we are not dismissed as inauthentic or inconsistent. For example, we must not major on biblical ethics of sexuality and gender without also seeking to be biblical in our economics and care for the environment. We must, however, accept that one of the major challenges with commending the gospel through our good deeds in the current context is that we have a different vision of the good from the culture that surrounds us. Like the believers to whom Peter wrote his first epistle, we must maintain, “a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame”.<sup>18</sup> This ‘putting to shame’ is not, however, always in this age. The apostle

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<sup>16</sup> Claims that all religions are basically the same usually rest on the assumption that religion is all about ethics. Whilst there is a great deal of agreement between, for example, Christianity and Buddhism about what is moral, there is a vastly different understanding of how we become good or what to do when we fall short of the standard of good.

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew 5:13-16; Galatians 6:10; Titus 3:8.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Peter 3:16.

continues to say, “it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil”.<sup>19</sup> In a fallen and corrupt world – increasingly, as ethical values depart from a deontological base closer to biblical standards to moral relativism in personal choices with absolutist insistence on autonomy, tolerance and freedom, we will suffer for doing good as Scripture defines it and even for testifying to the fact that there is a standard of good (an ethical truth) that can be known and is binding for all.

This may sound like a negative assessment, but the eschatological perspective should give us confidence and hope. As people who live for God’s final assessment, we are willing to suffer loss in this age. At the same time, we know that our distinctive ethic – our consistent good, that resonates with what is written in the hearts of sinful people, to which their conscience testifies, and that was embodied fully in the provocative person of Christ – will be used by God both in judgement and salvation. In the final analysis, God will vindicate His people and pronounce judgement on those who have reviled them. On that day, however, there will also be those who give glory to Him precisely because that saw our good deeds and heard our reason for the hope we have and came to know Christ as the cornerstone for life, faith and ethics.<sup>20</sup>

To people who do not know about Jesus or reject Him, Christian ethics may seem foreign and implausible (foolishness to those who are perishing). We cannot expect people to agree with our definitions of sin, or even with the concept of sin. As people accountable to God, we must not compromise on what Scripture teaches about the good but must think carefully about how we can do what is good with a clear conscience before God. This may lead us to be misunderstood. Non-believers may be, “surprised when [we] do not join them in the same flood of debauchery”, and they may well, “malign us”, but we know, “they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead”.<sup>21</sup> It is then that those who mistreat God’s people will finally be put to shame, while those who have humbled themselves under God’s mighty hand will be exalted (1 Peter 5:6). In the meantime, we trust that the gospel remains true and through the convicting work of the Spirit of God it will continue to transform lives in unexpected and miraculous ways.

#### *CONCLUSION: KNOWING, CHOOSING AND DOING THE GOOD*

Our calling as believers in Christ is to know, choose and do the good in every situation. I have argued that good deeds, biblically understood, are godly, obedient and wise. An action is not truly good unless the motivation, means and

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Peter 3:17

<sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 2:1-12; 3:15

<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 4:4-5

ends are good. We cannot defend harmful actions simply because our motive was good, any more than we can claim an action is obedient to God because we judge its consequences to be good despite the fact that it transgresses a biblical command. These are not distinct principles – any action that is wise must also be obedient and any action that is obedient will, by definition, be godly.

In closing, I hope it has been clear in this discussion that morality for the Christian is never a matter of aiming for the minimum that is permissible without breaking God's law, but of striving towards maximum love for God and others, full Christlikeness and the joyous surrender of our rights for the sake of others. God wants us to mature so that we can discern what is good. He is preparing us for an eternity serving Him and the decisions we make now are all part of that process of growth. These three principles can act as tests to help us assess our behaviour and reach decisions about how we should act. We must make it our aim to have healthy ethical roots, shoots and fruits.

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