

## INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS: Biblical Worldview Thinking:

*"I don't know why we are here, but  
I am pretty sure that is not in  
order to enjoy ourselves."*

*~ Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889-1951*

## Overview of Lecture:

- I. What is the study of "ethics"?
- II. Important terms to know:
- III. Christian Models of Ethics:

## I. What is the Study of Ethics?

The study of problems of right  
conduct in light of moral principles  
such as compassion, goodness,  
justice, rationality, responsibility, and  
virtue.

## Ethics:

- The word "*ethics*" comes from the Greek word "*ethos*," which means "*character*."
- Choices concerning what values to embrace and how to treat oneself and one's responsibilities to others are matters of ethics.
- The term ethics is often used interchangeably with the term "*morality*," which is derived from the Latin word "*mores*," "*customs*."

## Ethics:

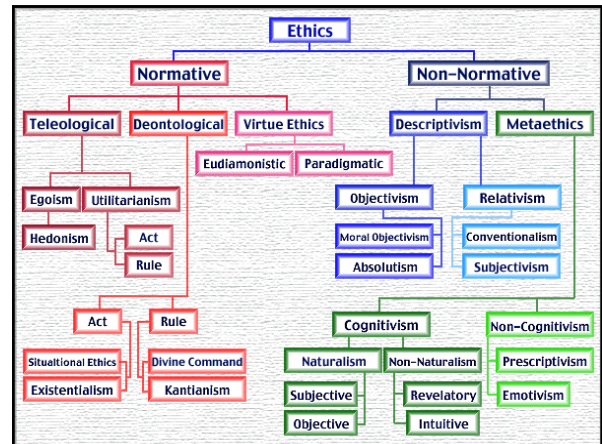
- Ethics involves distinguishing right from wrong, defining good & bad, & to consider the consequences of our actions.
- Questions like "*What is the right thing to do?*" & "*Why is this the right thing to do?*" are the basis of ethical inquiry.
- Ethics inquires into why we have a sense of right and wrong at all, how ethical views are grounded, and whether or not there are universal principles.

## Ethics:

Consider the following:

1. Some believe that our sense of right & wrong comes from God.
2. Others believe that our sense of right & wrong is a natural capacity, like our ability to reason.
3. Still, there are others have argued that our sense of right & wrong arises from our individual experiences in the world.

## II. Important Terms to Know:



### 1. Absolutism

There are definite and universal standards of ethical behavior, that we can know what they are, & that all people have an obligation to act on them.

- a. Believed to be standards which are dictated by human reason (e.g., virtue theory).
- b. These ethical standards are either “religious” in nature (e.g., special revelation; the Bible).

### 2. Pluralism:

There are definite standards of right behavior but that more than one right standard exists.

- There are several right course of action.

### 3. Relativism:

The theory that there are no absolute standards and that all truth is relative to a person or culture.

- No universal moral law or norm of goodness or rightness exists.
- What seems right to a person or group is right; there is no higher court of appeal.

### 3. Relativism assumes the following:

1. The context or situational setting in which any talk occurs *influences* its outcome or the conclusions that arise from it.
2. Relativism leads to the conclusion that the situational character of all conversations have no access to a standpoint from which we could reach conclusions about what is absolute or universally right or wrong, good or evil, just or unjust.

### 3. Relativism assumes the following:

3. Moral relativism declares that assertions about the right and the good, as well as laws or principles that guide human moral behavior are *contextually* determined.

### 3a. Cultural Relativism:

A form of pluralism, this theory holds that different standards of right and wrong arise in different cultures. Within a given culture there are distinct standards, but these standards may vary from culture to culture.

- No culture is in a position to make ethical judgments about the behaviors of other cultures.

- Ex. One culture may have a prohibition against slavery, whereas another culture does not. In this view, slavery is right for the one culture but wrong for the other.

### 3b. Individual Relativism:

A form of pluralism, individual relativism is the doctrine that states that what is right depends on the view of a specific individual.

Ex. If a lady believes that extramarital affairs are morally permissible but her husband does not, then extramarital affairs are right for her, but wrong for him.

### 3c. A Problem of Relativist Theories:

A. They seem unable to account to how strongly people feel about certain immoral acts.

Ex. If a Nazi soldier believes that torturing Jewish children is morally permissible, can we only say that such behavior is right for him but that it is not right for us?

B. They are unable to offer a strong account for justice vs. injustice; good vs. evil, right vs. wrong; it is counter-intuitive.

### 3c. A Problem of Relativist Theories:

C. Unlivable and inconsistent with reality.

### 4. Deontological Ethics

We should choose actions based on their inherent, intrinsic worth; evangelical approaches to ethics are deontological because it presupposes Scripture as revelation.

"Deontological" comes from the Greek word "deon", meaning that which is binding, in particular a binding duty. So, you are bound to your duty.

## 4. Deontological Ethics

It holds that acts are right or wrong in and of themselves because of the kinds of acts they are and not simply because of their ends or consequences.

- The ends do not justify the means.
- A good end or purpose does not justify a bad actions.
- You are duty-bound; binding is not dependent on consequences, no matter if it is painful or pleasurable.

## 4. Deontological Ethics

For example:

1. You are duty-bound to keep your promise to be faithful to your spouse, even if a more attractive person comes along.
2. You are duty-bound to always telling the truth, even if it cost you a job.

*Duty is not based on what is pleasant or beneficial, but rather upon the obligation itself.*

## 4. Deontological Ethics

For example, a deontologist might argue that a promise ought to be kept simply because it is right to keep a promise, regardless whether the doing so will have good or bad consequences.

In contrast, a utilitarian will argue that we should keep our promises only when keeping them results in better consequences than the alternatives.

## 4. Criticisms against Deontological Ethics:

1. How do decide between two principles?
2. What about moral conflict between two morally right principles.
3. From where or whom do we get our principles? Nature? God?
4. If we get our principles from God, who is he and why doesn't he make himself more obvious?

## 4. Criticisms against Deontological Ethics:

5. If from nature, that assume what is in nature is good.
6. How do we define nature?
7. We should follow our conscience? However, different people's conscience tell them to do different things. Ex. If the Bible condemns divorce, why do people say God told him or her to divorce his or her spouse? Isn't this a conflict?

## 5. Consequential Ethics:

We choose the actions that bring about the best outcomes:

- Egoism: we should always act to maximize our own individual interests.
- Utilitarianism: we should act to maximize the happiness of all affected by the action.

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

- This theory holds that an act is right or wrong according to the utility or value of its consequences.
- An act that produces more good than harm has greater value than an act that produces more harm than good.

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

- Utilitarianism believes in the value of ethical laws in helping people determine which action will probably bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
- While they are not against laws or values (antinomians), they are not absolutists either.
- Every act is judged by its results, not by its intrinsic and universal value.

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

- In order to determine the best consequence, some argue that you must add up the happiness in one person and then multiply the total happiness in the total number of people and subtract the total pain.
  - If the result is positive then the action is good.
  - If the result is negative then the action is bad.

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

- Uses of Utilitarian Ethics in terms of Pleasure vs. Pain (Peter Singer):
  1. When we testify the safety of a new shampoo, we drip the shampoo in concentrated form into the eye of rabbits, causing them terrible pain. But does shampoo leaving your hair lustrous and manageable, sufficient to justify the infliction of so much suffering?

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

2. The taste of a char-grilled steak, juicy and tender, is a genuine source of pleasure. But can this gourmet pleasure (which is not essential to sustain our lives), and in fact may shorten our lives by contributing to LDL levels, justify the infliction of suffering on cattle that are raised on crowded feedlots, and then herded into slaughter houses?

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

3. It must be delightful to live in an elegant home, richly equipped with a Jacuzzi and sauna in addition to having a master bedroom suite with an entire wall-covered entertainment system. But is it really right to spend that much on luxuries that add only a small increase to our pleasure when the same resources could be used to care for impoverished children living in hunger? For example, \$21.00 US dollars can feed over 150 elementary students in Ghana for two weeks (rice mixed with yams).

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

4. I purchase another expensive "GQ suit" to add to my already stuffed closet-for it will bring me pleasure. But is that small increment of pleasure even remotely comparable to the pleasure and relief of suffering that would result if I took that same money and purchased clothes to orphan children or a threadbare family?

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

5. A tummy tuck will certainly improve sagging appearances and make some of us feel better. But the cost of a tummy tuck can be used to drill a water well and provide clean and pure water to an entire village in most third world countries.

## 5: A closer look at Utilitarianism:

### 6. Utilitarian Ethics and Public Policy:

If we are trying to decide whether a new football stadium with luxury boxes for the very rich is a better investment than decent inner-city schools and health care for the poor, is utilitarian calculations a better guide for making such decisions than deontological ethics?

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

### 1. The end does not justify the means.

An act is not automatically good simply because it has a good goal.

The road to destruction is paved with good intentions (Prov. 14:12).

Ex. President Nixon's goal of national security was noble, but the criminal activity of Watergate was not justified.

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

### 2. Utilitarian acts have no intrinsic value.

Ex. The attempt to save a life is not an intrinsically valuable act.

No benevolence, no sacrifice, no love has any value unless it happens to have good results.

Ex. If forced to choose to save either a medical doctor or a poor child from a destructive house fire, one is obligated to save the medical doctor.

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

### 3. People are subject to the greater good of statistics:

Ex. If forced to choose to save either a medical doctor or a poor child from a destructive house fire, one is obligated to save the medical doctor because we know he is able to help people; we don't know the future of the child.

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

### 4. The need for an absolute standard:

Relative norms do not stand alone. They must be relative to something which is not relative. So, unless there is a standard, how can they know what is the greater good.

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

### 5. The “end” is an ambiguous term:

If the utilitarian contends that ethics should be based on what will bring the best results in the long run, how long is “long?” A few years? a life-time? Eternity? Anything beyond the immediate present is outside of the human range.

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

### 6. Ambiguous as well in determining whether the “end” means “for the greatest number” or for “all individuals.”

Could good be achieved for the most people if basic rights were denied to some people? Is this intuitively right?

## 5: Problems with Utilitarianism:

Pleasure vs. Pain:

- Pain and Pleasure are not exact opposites. Is this true?
- How do you measure pain and pleasure?
- Can pain be beneficial over and against pleasure?

## 5a. Conclusion to Consequentialism:

*Consequentialists believe that consequences are the only things that matter:*

- A. We do not necessarily know the outcome.
- B. The consequences of our own action may be unpredictable.

## 5a. Conclusion to Consequentialism:

- C. The consequences of other people's actions which impact on our actions may also be unpredictable.
- D. We do not know what the consequences will be of our action in the *long term*.
- E. We can't necessarily control the consequences.

## 5a. Concluding thought to Consequentialism:

Dostoyesky's Challenge to Utilitarian Ethicists:

"Tell me honestly, I challenge you-answer me: imagine that you are charged with building the edifice of human destiny, the ultimate aim of which is to bring people happiness, to give them peace and contentment at last, but that in order to achieve this it is essential and unavoidable to torture just one speck of creation, that...little child beating her chest with her little fists, and imagine that this edifice has to be erected on her unexpiated [suffering for having done nothing wrong] tears. Would you agree to be the architect under those conditions? Tell me honestly!"

~ *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. Ignat Avsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

## 6. Situational Ethics:

Ethics depends on the situation that calls for action and not on any principle.

Ex. Majority or elite determines what is right or wrong.

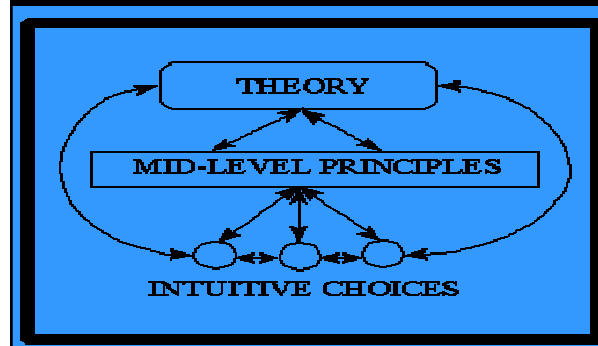
Ex. **Situational Contract Ethics:** two parties agree what is right from wrong.

## 7. Reflective Equilibrium:

First, we use our intuitions to formulate principles to live by and secondly, formulate principles from our situational setting.

Then, these two levels engage each other (i.e., reflect) to sharpen, refine, or even change our justifications for moral choices as time and culture changes and more information is added.

## 7. Reflective Equilibrium:



"I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."

~ Galileo Galilei.

## 8. Natural Law Theory:

1. It is moral law presumed to be grounded in nature itself. A natural law is a norm for ethical behavior that is deemed binding on all humans because it coheres with the human essence or with the structure of the universe (grounded in nature itself), perhaps because it was legislated by God.

2. Insofar as natural law can be known by reason alone, without special revelation, they provide guidance for all humans, and when followed they enhance the common good, but also render each person morally responsible to a divine judge.

## 8. Natural Law Theory:

- The idea initially arose among the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, esp. promoted by Judaism and Stoics. But it came to the foreground in the Christian tradition as thinkers drew from both philosophy and the Bible to devise a theory of morality and politics that could be understood to be universally applicable.

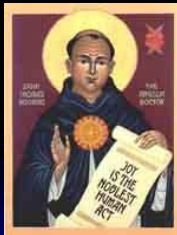
**Natural Rights:** Entitlements with which humans are endowed by nature or by virtue of their status as being human.

## What is natural law theory?

- There are foundational moral principle which are not only right for all, but at some level known to all.
- In other words, there exists ethical standards which are the same for all, meaning they are right for everyone; at some level, everyone knows them.
- It is natural law because it is "built into the design of human nature and woven into the fabric of the normal human mind; it is genuine knowledge "written on the heart."
- Therefore, there are no moral skeptics; supposed skeptics are playing make-believe.



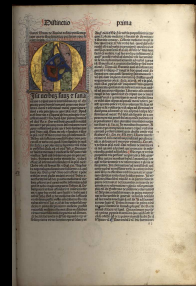
## Clarifying Natural Law Theory:



- Natural law is not innate for we are not born knowing it. With the capability of understanding we come to understand what is meant by "murder" and by "wrong."
- Natural law is not merely biological instinct though it does take into account of certain biological realities.
- Natural law is not mere custom-though customs of almost all times and places more or less acknowledge it.
- Natural law is not a law of nature in the same sense that gravitation is a law of nature.

## Natural Law Theory:

- The "conscience" is the pedagogue to the soul (teacher).
- Judaism, Origen, and Aquinas say that all ten of the Commandments (the Decalogue) are in some sense self-evident. Modern Christian scholars such as J. Budziszewski defend this view.



## Conscience



Treatise on Life and Passion of Christ, Aquinas, 15th century Dutch manuscript.

- We know that we are to pursue good and avoid evil because natural law is written on the heart (prescriptive, not descriptive).
- We have the ability to tell right from wrong.
- We can violate natural law, but when we do, we personally suffer (e.g., guilt).

## 9. Aristotle's Virtue Ethics:



## 9. What is Virtue Ethics?

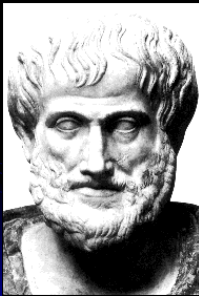
Virtue Ethics emphasizes the development of character as its central theme rather than trying to define 'goodness' or 'rightness'. It is a eudaimonistic theory as it holds 'happiness' to be our highest goal. According to Aristotle, we attain happiness by cultivating both intellectual and moral virtue. We become virtuous by habit: we deliberately and consistently choose the mean between excess and deficiency until it becomes second-nature.

## 9. What is Virtue Ethics?

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

~ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

## 9. Virtue = excellence:



- Intellectual virtue can be taught.
- A good person succeeds at rational activity.
- Moral virtue is acquired through excellent habits.
- We become good by doing good things.
- We become virtuous by practicing virtuous acts.

## 9. Right and wrong

- An act is right if it is something a virtuous person would tend to do



## Practical Wisdom

- A good person consistently does the right thing at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reason.
- There is no rule for becoming good, or for distinguishing good from bad, right from wrong.
- **Practical wisdom:** ability to draw the right distinctions and tell right from wrong.

## Virtue as a Mean

- Virtues are means between extremes
- Virtues constrain desires
- But we may constrain too little or too much

*MODERATION IN ALL THINGS IS PARAMOUNT!*

## Virtue as a Mean:

- We must give in to desire in the right circumstances, in the right way, for the right reason, etc.
- Practical wisdom allows us to find the mean.
- There's no rule for doing this.
- You must learn to see what is right

## Virtues and Vices: Moderation!

Drive	Too little	Just right	Too much
Fear	cowardly	<i> courageous </i>	rash
Pleasure	self-indulgent	<i> self-controlled </i>	insensitive
Material goods	stingy	<i> generous </i>	extravagant
Self-esteem	vain	<i> high-minded </i>	small-minded
Anger	short-tempered	<i> gentle </i>	apathetic
Sociability	obsequious	<i> friendly </i>	grouchy
Boasting	boastful	<i> truthful </i>	self-deprecating
Humor	clownish	<i> witty </i>	boring
Drive for honor	ambitious	<i> ? </i>	unambitious
Spending	grudging	<i> magnificent </i>	vulgar

## III. Major Models of Christian Ethics!

- Unqualified Absolutism (Anabaptist)
- Conflict Absolutism (Lutheran)
- Graded Absolutism (Reformed).

Remember: Absolutism states that ethical principles are not only objective features of the world, but that they are always binding on all moral agents and can never be overridden by other relevant moral or non-moral concerns.

## Unqualified Absolutism: Sin is always avoidable.

Unqualified absolutism which is rooted in the Anabaptist tradition affirms that all moral conflicts are only apparent; they are not real.

## Will God always spare the faithful?

- Does God promise that He will always intervene to save us from all moral conflicts?
- Did the three Hebrew children expect God to bail them out of their moral dilemma?
- Did Jesus speak against expecting a miracle to get one out of difficult circumstances (Matt. 4:7)?
- Does expecting a miracle shift the responsibility from us to God? Is it a kind of "if in trouble, punt to God" ethic?
- Should we base the reality of a present decision on the possibility that God may perform a miracle in the future?

## Will God always spare the faithful?

- Does believing that God will intervene if we do right beg the question?
- Does such a view demand frequent miraculous intervention?

## Will God always spare the faithful?

- Consider where third alternatives were not available:
  - Hospitals, courtrooms, and battlefields.
  - Sometimes one must kill or be killed.
  - The baby must die or both the mother and baby will die (tubal pregnancies).

## Will God always spare the faithful?

- Consider where third alternatives were not available:
  - Was there a third alternative for Abraham in killing Isaac (Genesis 22)?
  - Was there a third alternative for the three Hebrew children in Daniel 3?
  - Can one commit a greater sin of omission in order to avoid what he believes to be a sin of commission?

## Will God always spare the faithful?

- Would you return a weapon you had borrowed from a man if he requested it back in order to kill someone with it?
- Can a case be made that saving the lives of the innocent (mercy) is a greater duty than telling the truth to the guilty (Exod. 1:15-16)?
- In failing to show mercy to the innocent by withholding from the guilty, does the unqualified absolutist fall into a sin of omission while attempting to avoid a sin of commission?

## Conflict Absolutism: Always do the lesser evil.

Conflict Absolutism affirms that moral conflicts are inevitable because we live in a fallen world. When two duties conflict, we are responsible to both duties. God's law can never be broken without guilt. Therefore, in such cases, we must simply do the lesser evil and confess our sin (1 John 1:9).

## Tenets of Conflict Absolutism:

- God's law is absolute and unbreakable (Exod. 20:7; Psalm 19:7, 11; 119:4,160).
- In a fallen world unavoidable conflicts between God's commands occur.
- When moral conflict happen, we should do the lesser evil (John 19:11; Matt. 12:32).
- Forgiveness is available if we confess our sins (1 John 1:9).

## Criticisms of Conflict Absolutism:

- Is one morally obligated to do evil?
- How can there ever be a moral obligation to do what is evil?

## Tenets of Conflict Absolutism:

- It is in touch with the real world of moral conflicts; not every decision is neat and clean.
- It sees moral conflicts as rooted in man's fallen condition.
- It preserves Moral Absolutes.
- It is always wrong to break an absolute moral law of God; there are not exceptions, exemptions or divine immunity.

## Graded Absolutism:

This view advocates the idea that when two or more universal ethical norms come into unavoidable conflict, the Christian's non-culpable duty is to follow the higher one. This position maintains that one is personally *guiltless* if he or she does the greatest good and chooses the lesser evil in a hard case situation. In other words, God grants an exemption to the lower moral law in view of one's duty to obey the higher one. This is from the Reformed tradition.

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

- It preserves Moral Absolutes.
- It is in touch with the real world of moral conflicts; not every decision is neat and clean.
- It sees moral conflicts as rooted in man's fallen condition.
- When moral conflicts are unavoidable, it recognizes maintaining the higher moral law over the lower moral law.
- No imputation of guilt if higher moral law if a lower moral absolute was violated.

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

Biblical Moral conflicts include:

The story of Samson whereby he committed a divinely approved suicide despite the moral prohibition against killing a human being ("do not kill") in Judges 16:30; Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter in Judges 11 even though one is not to kill an innocent life; the choice between lying and not helping to save a life as exhibited with the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1 and Rahab in Joshua 2; the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ whereby people advocate that Jesus, an innocent man, took the punishment for the sins of others (Isaiah 53; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21); and finally, there are other cases in the Bible whereby there was a conflict between obeying God's command to submit to civil government and maintaining one's obligation to some other higher laws such as the Hebrew midwives to disregard the Pharaoh's command to kill all male infants (Exodus 1), the Jewish captives ignored Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the golden image of himself (Daniel 3), and Daniel disregarded Darius' command to pray only to the him (Daniel 6) [Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 117-19].

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

Biblical passages used to substantiate higher and lower moral laws:

1. **Matthew 22:34-40** to be the clearest indication of higher and lower moral laws with Jesus affirming that the "first" and "greatest" commandment of loving God is of preeminent importance whereas the "second" commandment is loving one's neighbor.
2. **Matthew 23:23** where reference is given to the "weightier" matters of the law;
3. **John 19:11** whereby Jesus explained to Pilate that Judas committed the "greater sin" (John 19:11).

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

Biblical passages used to substantiate higher and lower moral laws:

4. **1 Corinthians 13:13** the author speaks of the "greatest" virtue;
5. **Matthew 10:37** states, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37);
6. and other passages that support this hierarchy include **Proverbs 6:16; Matthew 5:22; John 15:12; 1 Corinthians 5 cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 Timothy 1:5; 1 John 5:16** (Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 116-17).

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

*No guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.*

Geisler claims that God does not hold individuals accountable or responsible for personally unavoidable moral conflicts, providing that he or she maintains the higher law. He appeals to the following considerations.

- First, logic suggests that a just God will not hold a person responsible for doing what is actually impossible; it is actually impossible to avoid the unavoidable. In other words, it is impossible to take two opposite courses of action at the same time.

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

*No guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.*

- Second, an individual is not morally culpable if he or she fails to keep a duty that could not possibly be maintained without breaking a higher obligation because commendable conduct of keeping the higher requirement releases one of any responsibility to the lower duty. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 119-20.

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

*No guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.*

Third, Geisler appeals to the Bible for examples of people who were honored by God for following their highest obligations in situations of moral conflict. For example, he cites the account of Abraham whereby God honored him for his willingness to sacrifice (kill) his son for Him (Genesis 22). Similarly, the prophet Daniel and three Hebrew children received divine approval for their civil disobedience. Christ declared David and his men guiltless for breaking into the temple and stealing the hallowed bread (Matthew 12:3-4). Geisler asserts that in each case there was divine approval for breaking a lower responsibility to maintain the higher moral duty.

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

- Therefore, in real, unavoidable moral conflicts, God does not hold a person guilty for not keeping a lower moral law so long as he keeps the higher.
- God exempts one from his duty to keep the lower law since he could not keep it without breaking a higher law.

## Tenets of Graded Absolutism:

This exemption functions something like an ethical 'right of way' law. In many states the law declares that when two cars simultaneously reach an intersection without signals or signs, the car on the right has the right of way. Common sense dictates that they both cannot go through the intersection at the same time; one car must yield. Similarly, when a person enters an ethical intersection where two laws come into unavoidable conflict, it is evident that one law must yield to the other.

## Criticisms of Graded Absolutism:

1. ?
2. ?
3. ?

## Concluding Questions:

- Do you think ethics is a matter of natural processes, or is it transcendent (supernaturally revealed by God)?
- Are ethical principles made or discovered?
- Is ethics objective or non-objective?
- Are there actual objective facts in ethics, or is it all just a matter of opinion?

## Concluding Questions:

- Can I be completely wrong about one of my ethical beliefs?
- Is ethics a matter of protecting the individual or enhancing the welfare of all? In other words, is ethics basically individualistic or in some way communitarian?
- If people from a different culture have different ethical rules or obligations from our own, must at least one set of rules be wrong?
- Is this known more through reason or by experience of some sort?
- Even those who deny that objective ethical truths are split on this question?

