

# Christian Ethics

The discipline of ethics seeks to answer the questions of what is right, good or virtuous as well as helping one to decide how to behave. While other ethics (such as situational ethics) appeal to no source beyond the case itself, Christian Ethics have a transcendent norm, a standard beyond humans. As Christian ethics brings the discussion of right and wrong into the context of the God we meet in the Old and New Testament.

This seven-week course assumes no knowledge of ethics as a discipline. Though the course will build on the experience you bring as a Christian who has some considerable life experience in making moral choices.

## Vocabulary

Each discipline uses terms unique to that discipline. It will be helpful to have a common understanding of the following words which will be used throughout the course.

**Pathos** is loss. Life is lived with a sense of loss and there is often a loss in making moral choices. When we try to avoid pathos in the Christian life, we tend toward idolatry in creating a life without loss, sorrow or suffering making life itself a greater good than the God who gives life.

### Moral Principles:

**Principle of Nonmaleficence** is the maxim for human action stating that one should act in order to do no harm to others. This is connected to decisions based on the sanctity of life.

**Principle of Beneficence** is the maxim for human action claiming that one should act to do good. One should take an action which will create a good in the future.

**Principle of Autonomy** is the maxim for human action stating one should act in order to assume responsibility for one's own future. One should act to honor another's self-determination.

**Principle of Justice** is the maxim for human action stating that humans should act so as to treat equals equally.

### Other Useful Terms:

#### Criteria of Justice

In particular matters regarding particular goods, the following criteria of justice may be used: **simple equality** is to each the same; **need** is to each according to his or her need; **merit** is to each according to merit; **benefit** is to each according to the benefit of society; and **effort** is to each according to his or her effort.

**Direct Means of Euthanasia** is an action which is intended to take life of another for the sake of the relief of suffering.

**Indirect Means of Euthanasia** is an action which is intended to relieve suffering in which the unintended consequence is to shorten life.

**Informed Consent** is the consent for undertaking an action which is freely made based on adequate understanding of what is to be done and what are the possible consequences.

**Just War Theory** is the idea that war can be justified when there is just cause, right authority, right intention, probability of success, proportionality, and it is undertaken as a last resort.

**Paternalism** involves action in which a person or other agent acts on the behalf of another for their (perceived) well being. It is overruling autonomy for their well-being.

## Goods in Conflict

In making any moral choice there rarely is a clear choice between good and evil. More often, there is one possible good in conflict with another possible good. One situation that illustrates the point would involve withdrawing care at the request of the person receiving medical treatment. Preserving the person's autonomy is good, but taking care of his or her health is also good. These goods are in conflict when one decides what action to take or to withhold and one must decide which is the greater good in a given situation.

Would it change your decision if the patient in this case was a six-year old child refusing to get a needed vaccination as he or she wants to avoid the pain of the shot? This second piece of information highlights the need to use case studies in discussing ethics.

## Case Studies

This course will emphasize the use of cases studies. This is not in an appeal to merely situational ethics, but because ethical decision making is best practiced with real-world examples. When considering any case, cover the following three points:

1. Consider the different options available.
2. Weigh the goods in conflict.
3. Give reasons for the choice made.

## An Outline of the class

Week	General Topic
1	Pathos and a survey of the terrain
2	Lying (a brief history of the lie, with cases)
3	Medical ethics (stem cell research, abortion, etc.)
4	End-of-Life Issues (sancity of life and idolatry)
5	Warfare (which wars are just?)
6	Justice (how shall a society distribute the goods?)
7	Sexuality and wrap up loose ends

This course relies almost exclusively on the work of Dr. Timothy F. Sedgwick, a professor of Christian Ethics at Virginia Theological Seminary, who encourages his students to reuse his materials in a church setting.

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Making moral choices  
in the real world



a seven week study