

## Compassion and the Ethical Calculus

By [John Frame](#)

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The Bible teaches that ethical values are objective and that obligations are something real, not just figments of our subjectivity. We discover these through God's revelation in nature, conscience, and particularly in Scripture, which is a sufficient ethical guide. God expects us to learn our duty from this revelation and to do that duty. In theological ethics, the "normative perspective," particularly, tries to discern what that duty is. Here we make distinctions between what Scripture commands, forbids, permits, praises (see essay, *Levels of Ethical Evaluation*). It is important for us to have clear ideas here, lest we command what Scripture does not command, or permit what Scripture forbids. It is by such reasoning that we discover and formulate the scope of the church's ethical authority and of the Christian's liberty.

Thus ethics appears to be something like a calculus. While mathematics works with numbers, and logic with the values "true" and "false," ethics works with the values "right and wrong," and through various ethical syllogisms it determines what maxims and behavior fall under these categories.

There are, however, problems with this sort of ethical calculation. First, it is hard to do. Not as hard, I think, as the "hedonistic calculus" of Bentham and Mill, which required virtual omniscience to reach conclusions. But even in the Christian "calculus," there are exegetical and situational complications that often leave us unsure as to the proper ethical conclusion.

The other major problem is the relation of the "right," so calculated, to God's will. Surely, we want to say, God's will is the ultimate standard of conduct. Yet God justifies *sinners*, apart from any good works on their part, simply for the sake of Jesus Christ. Thus a person's relationship to God, his acceptance with God, has nothing to do with what he has done or not done by way of obedience. Further, we learn from Scripture that the very best works of the believer are still inadequate by God's standards. The Reformed confessions teach that even believers sin in every thought, word, and deed. So what good does it do to perform "ethical calculations?" Whatever we do, it will be sinful in God's sight. And God is the ultimate judge, the only judge who really matters. So perhaps the conclusion is simply not to worry very much about rightness and wrongness and, in Luther's notorious phrase, to "sin boldly."

Yet there are other elements of biblical doctrine that point in a different direction. For one thing, Scripture makes clear that believers are holy before God and that they are growing in personal holiness. Although we must continually confess our sins to God, still in some way the indwelling spirit transforms us into obedient servants. And those who are unrepentantly disobedient should not be regarded as believers. If such profess Christ, they should be placed under discipline. And the doctrine of rewards in Scripture also presupposes that believers can do works which are genuinely good in some degree. There are degrees of reward in heaven, and those degrees are proportionate in some measure to the goodness or badness of our works. Thus, although the ethical calculus is irrelevant to justification, it is important as a measure of sanctification. We may not “sin boldly.” If we are bought with the blood of Christ and transformed into new creatures by His resurrection, we will want to obey his law. There is a difference between right and wrong choices, and we make that distinction by understanding Scripture.

But even granting these doctrinal truths, we may find our ethical despair returning when we seek to determine what in fact is right. For the biblical ethic is an ethic of perfection. It calls us to do all righteousness, to avoid the slightest sin, in thought, word, deed, or heart. It calls us to do all things to God’s glory, to spend every minute as God pleases, to “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires,” Rom. 13:14. It is hard even to know how to get started on such a monumental project; and our failures are such that discouragement is almost inevitable.

Therefore, we are often tempted to take the law in a minimizing way. In my teaching, I myself have tried to take the “sting” out of some apparently unworkable divine commands. I’ve argued that the large mandates, like the cultural mandate and the Great Commission, are given to the church as a whole, not to each individual, although each individual must determine what contribution he will make to the realization of these large programs. I have also argued, for example, that some actions in Scripture are praised but not commanded; so that in my view Scripture commends the heroism of David’s mighty men above the call of duty and the absurd generosity of the poor widow who gave the two mites, but does not strictly require all of us to do such things.

I’ve also written that God takes our epistemological limitations into account. For many reasons, such as our relative age and intelligence, our historical distance from the New Testament, our inability to find competent teachers, etc., we may be genuinely ignorant of God’s requirements. And I have concluded that we should not worry too much about this. God knows about these problems, and he does not expect more from us than we can do. We may, of course, deceive ourselves as to what we can and cannot do; but God always makes a fair judgment.

I still think this sort of argument can be defended at a practical level, but I have always been uneasy about it as a general principle. For the ultimate standard of the Christian life is the sacrifice of Christ. We are to love one another as he loved us. Therefore, perhaps, our whole ethic ought to be based on the *extraordinary* behavior of people like David's mighty men and the generous widow. But how can that be done? Certainly no finite person can maintain that pitch of heroism every minute of his life. If that sort of heroism is our standard, then we fall below it to such a discouraging degree that we may as well "sin boldly." Reading the law of God that way seems to make it entirely impractical.

So what do we do? Do we read the law as a practical guide to progressive sanctification, assuming that its requirements take our finitude, ignorance and sinful dispositions into account? Or do we take the law as a transcript of God's own infinite holiness, to which no human being save Christ can make any approach? Well, somehow, we must do both.

Consider the Pharisees' form of "minimizing" application. The Pharisees added to the law, or so they thought; yet they assured their disciples that if they kept all the clearly enumerated Pharisaic commands, God would be pleased. But the Pharisaic catalogue of rights and wrongs minimized the demands of God upon the heart, upon human lust and anger. And it restricted the scope of human love: you must love your neighbor, but you are free to hate your enemy. And of course, on such a view, "neighbor" is a limited concept: it refers to fellow Jews and sojourners, but not to Samaritans or Gentiles.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (and here I am indebted to a very fine sermon which Edmund P. Clowney recently preached on this text) is one of many passages in Scripture which rebuke this kind of ethical calculus, the Pharisaic casuistry. The "lawyer" who approaches Jesus seeks to know who his neighbor is: how can the concept "neighbor" in the phrase "love your neighbor" be restricted to make it ethically manageable? Jesus does not answer the lawyer's question, but rather tells a parable to show what it means to *be* a neighbor to someone else. "Neighbor" here becomes a concept dependent on a personal decision. A Samaritan can *decide* to be a neighbor to a wounded Jew. And to do that is ethically commendable. The important thing is "compassion," Luke 10:33. Here the existential perspective replaces the normative and presents us with a conclusion that would certainly have been hard to reach by any ethical calculus; certainly it would not have been the conclusion of any Pharisaic discussion of the proper scope of "neighbor."

Here, Jesus' ethic seems to be more an account of divine perfection than of a practical calculus. If we generalized this principle, it would seem to indicate that there is no limitation at all in the concept "neighbor," that we are responsible to meet the needs of absolutely everyone, a principle both ethically and metaphysically impossible. But I don't think Jesus' point is to force that generalization upon us. That would be to re-introduce the principle of calculus,

but at a higher level, an impractical level. Rather, what Jesus seems to be doing here, considered in terms of ethical method, is to relativize somehow the whole idea of a calculus. The Priest and the Levite doubtless had ways of justifying their indifference to the suffering stranger. Jesus does not explicitly condemn their calculations, or even their conclusions. But certainly he endorses the Samaritan's conduct over and above theirs.

The conclusion I would draw is this. The ethical calculus is not useless or to be despised. It is a legitimate tool for determining obligations and areas of freedom. But it also has its limitations. If we limit our conduct to what is strictly *required*, we may miss important opportunities to do God's work in the world. One who is truly *compassionate* will want to give assistance to another person, even at times when he might be justified in doing otherwise, even at times when he isn't, strictly speaking, *required* to.

There are Christians who exegete Scripture in such a way as to determine "how much can I get away with?" They see God's requirements as a sort of minimum, beyond which they can do anything they like. The Pharisees' approach above is an example of this. Another is the doctrine of *adiaphora*, which I have criticized elsewhere. And one *may* be tempted to use my own "minimizing" devices, described earlier, in this way. But Scripture rebukes this attitude in many ways. I Cor. 10:31, Rom. 14:23, Col. 3:17, 24, and many others indicate that every thought, word and deed involves an ethical decision for or against God. In this sense there are no *adiaphora*. The "ethical heroism" commended in Scripture points in the same direction.

So I would not discourage you from trying to ascertain the precise scope of "neighbor" in the phrase "love your neighbor as yourself." But beware of using that exegesis as a kind of rationalization, so that you can avoid loving anybody you're not "required" to love. That is the spirit of autonomy. That is the antinomian spirit lurking behind a pronomian facade. It fails to see that the law itself, at one level, goes far beyond finite practicalities to the perfection of Christ himself and of His Father. Our ethic is impoverished, if that ideal plays no role in our decisions.

So I would say that the Good Samaritan was not strictly *required* to do everything that he did. It would not have been sinful for him to have done a bit less. But his action pleased God, and God expects us to model our lives upon that sort of perfection, not to ignore that ideal in a quest to justify ourselves. In this way, we will often find that the existential perspective supplements the normative. But in doing so, it doesn't contradict the law; rather, it points us to a deeper dimension of the law, beyond the immediate norms to the ultimate perfection in which those norms are grounded.

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