

MORALITY AND ETHICS



How can we know right from wrong? Is there always a clear difference between what is right and what is wrong? Where do we get our sense of right and wrong from?

Working with a partner, write a list of beliefs, ideas, people, events and sources of information that might influence our sense of right and wrong.

Which do you think are the most important influences on your own sense of right and wrong? What are the least important? Give reasons for your answers, including at least two examples for each side of the question.

Knowing what is the right thing to do in any given situation isn't always easy. Christianity is a religion in which beliefs are supposed to be lived out and used as a guide for behaviour, so questions of morality and ethics are very important for Christians.

Christians believe that the Bible can help them to understand how they ought to make decisions about right and wrong in their own lives today. They believe it to be God's word, which they can apply to their moral choices.

Should we follow the rules or trust our good intentions?

One of the key questions about morality is whether it should be about following rules or about having good intentions for our actions.

- Absolute morality is the belief that our decision making should be led by rules, and that those rules should never be broken.
- Relative morality is the belief that we can choose how to act, and not always be governed by rules. Some people talk about the idea of "the lesser of two evils", where you have two difficult choices, so you try to take the choice which will do the least amount of harm or evil in the long term.
- Closely related to relative morality is 'situational ethics', which is named after a book by the philosopher Joseph Fletcher. Fletcher argued that following the way of love should take priority over following the rules.

Within Christianity, there are both rules and general principles which believers use to guide their decision making.

Some Christians might argue that relative morality and situational ethics should not be used, as you should never try to balance evils but only do good. They might also say that these ideas still encourage people to choose between two actions which can both do damage to a person.

However, an alternative view which might also be held by Christians is that absolute morality prioritises rules above people, and that the best thing is to do what you think is best for others. A guiding principle sometimes used by Christians is to ask themselves WWJD – What Would Jesus Do?

Do you think it is better to follow a set of rules or try to do what you personally think is the most loving act in the situation? Give reasons for your opinion.

What would the world be like if everyone followed the rules all of the time? What would it be like if there were no rules?

Always let your conscience be your guide?

Most people use their conscience as a guide on how to behave. A conscience can be explained as a person's internal sense of what is right and what is wrong.

Some people believe that our consciences are developed by all our interactions, and that we work out by trial and error what is acceptable and what isn't.

Christians might agree with that, but they would also believe that our conscience is part of us because it helps us to work out what we should do according to God's will. They also believe that they can develop an increasingly good sense of God's will through prayer.

What is distinctive about what a Christian understanding of what conscience is?



What does the Old Testament say about right and wrong?

One of the themes of the Old Testament is that God promised to be in a relationship with the Israelites; and that the Israelites promised to honour God in their lives and worship. In the Bible, this is called a covenant. The rules that God provided for the Israelites to follow include the Ten Commandments, and many Christians believe that they can find in them a set of clear directions to follow and apply to this day.

Earlier on in the book of Exodus, it describes how the Israelites, led by Moses, escaped from slavery in Egypt.

An **idol** is a statue or image which is worshipped as a god.

An **iniquity** is an act of evil behaviour.

In Christianity, the day of rest on the **Sabbath** takes place on Sundays.

An **alien resident** is someone from elsewhere who lives in your country, ie. an immigrant.

Something which is **consecrated** has been made holy.

To **covet** is to want to possess something which isn't yours.

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the **house of slavery**; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an **idol**, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth itself, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the **iniquities** of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the **sabbath** day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the **alien resident** in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blesses the Sabbath day and **consecrated** it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your day may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not **covet** your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Exodus chapter 20 verses 1-17 (NRSV)



Are the Ten Commandments about absolute or relative morality?

Which one of the Ten Commandments doesn't allow...

Being jealous of something another person owns

Shoplifting

Blaming someone else for what you did wrong

Working on a Sunday

Being unfaithful to your partner or spouse

Worshipping other gods

As well as the Ten Commandments, there are over 600 other laws and rules in the Old Testament. These include rules about how you eat, how you should treat your family and those who work for you, among many others. In Old Testament times, knowing the laws of God and trying to follow them was often seen as the solution to knowing what was right from wrong.

The Ten Commandments are at least 3,000 years old. Which parts of them indicate that they are from an ancient time?

Are there any Commandments which you think have lost their relevance today? Give reasons for your answers.

What is different about the last of the Ten Commandments compared with the other nine? (Here's a clue : think about actions and feelings.)



What does the New Testament say about right and wrong?

Matthew's Gospel includes some teaching by Jesus which is known as the Sermon on the Mount.

In it, Jesus says that he has come to fulfil the Law of Moses, not to abolish it. In other words, what he teaches will be in harmony with the laws in the Old Testament, and what he says develops and extends the teachings found there.

He taught that intentions and feelings matter as much as actions do. For example, his teaching on murder broadens the idea by seeing how anger is at its root.

For each of these sections of the Sermon on the Mount, what was the original teaching, how does Jesus add to it, and what difference does it make?

Those of ancient times means the people of the Old Testament, the ancestors of Jesus' audience.

The council was a lawcourt.

'You have heard that it was said to **those of ancient times**, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be **liable** to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the **council**; and if you say "you fool", you will be liable to the **hell of fire**.'

Matthew chapter 5 verses 21-22 (NRSV)

To be **liable** is to have to answer to the law for a something you have done wrong.

The Greek word used by Jesus here is 'Gehenna', which was the name of a valley outside Jerusalem where a pile of rubbish was constantly on fire.

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'

Matthew chapter 5 verses 27-28 (NRSV)

'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'

Matthew chapter 5 verses 38-39 (NRSV)



Do you think intentions matter as much as actions? Give reasons for your answers, using examples to back up your ideas.

How would passages like these from the Sermon on the Mount help Christians to follow the principle of WWJD?

The Indian political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi, who was a Hindu, said of Jesus' teaching,

"...although I am myself not a Christian, as a humble student of the Bible, who approaches it with faith and reverence, I wish respectfully to place before you the essence of the Sermon on the Mount..."

Christians usually believe that the teachings of Jesus, found in the Gospels, have a superior authority to the rest of the Bible (though that doesn't mean that the rest of the Bible is unimportant to them). Martin Luther King looked to the Sermon on the Mount for inspiration, saying that it had influenced his campaign against racism, having seen Gandhi use non-violence to help him in South Africa and India.

To find out more about how Christians make ethical and moral decisions, now watch the video at:

biblesociety.org.uk/e/morality-and-ethics

Which of these ways of making decisions are unique to Christianity? Which would also be carried out by followers of other religions? And, which could be used by anyone, regardless of their religious beliefs?

To follow the Bible's key principles

To listen to religious leaders

To use your own conscience

To take account of discoveries of disciplines such as science and psychology

