

Why Christians Never Have to Choose “The Lesser Sin”

(why we should never think we are facing a “tragic moral choice”)

- A. The problem: Some Christian writers teach that from time to time we may face a situation where our moral duties conflict with each other and we cannot obey both of them at once.
- a very common view in secular ethics, and also in many evangelical ethics books
 - 1. Example: the duty to protect life and the duty to tell the truth.
 - 2. Norman Geisler, *Ethics : Alternatives and Issues* (Zondervan, 1971): “It is always wrong to tell a lie . . . unless some other responsibility transcends it . . . a lie necessitated by the duty to save lives is justified.” (p. 131)
 - a. Based on “ethical hierarchicalism”: “Lesser goods must give way to greater goods . . . when norms representing different values conflict, which value is intrinsically higher? Since on the hierarchical position one ought always to do the highest good possible (even if it means doing a lower evil), then one must have some way of knowing which values are intrinsically higher” (p. 115; see also p. 95).
 - b. How can it be right to disobey an ethical norm?
 - “When one obeys a higher norm in favor of a lower and opposing one, he is not really breaking the lower one but transcending it. He is not making an exception to the lower norm but getting an exemption from it in view of a superior obligation” (p. 131).
 - 3. John & Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Crossway, 1993): “As to moral conflicts, we think some form of hierarchicalism handles matters best . . . there are certain *prima facie* duties that we all have . . . When, for example, *prima facie* duties conflict, one cannot fulfill both. Failure to do both does not make one morally guilty” (p. 31). [no examples here from Scripture]
 - a. “*prima facie*” means (lit.) “first face”; that is, on first appearance or first sight. Examples: duties to keep promises, help others in need. In other words, *general obligations* which may, however, be disobeyed in particular special circumstances.
 - b. “If two duties mutually exclude one another, one cannot obey both when those duties conflict. No one is free to do the impossible” (p. 31).
 - c. Example of Christ: “It is unthinkable that while on earth Christ never confronted a situation where two duties conflicted so as to make it impossible to do both. In fact, Scripture says he was tempted in all points as we (Heb 4:15), and since we face such situations, he must have, too. However, the same verse says he was without sin; if that is so, it must be possible to confront such decisions, obey one duty, and not sin by neglecting or disobeying the other” (p. 32). [but they give no example where Christ disobeyed a command of Scripture]
 - 4. Glen Stassen & David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (IVP, 2003): 102-107: ethical “rules” (from the Bible) are generally to be followed, but they can be overridden by deeper “principles”:
 - a. “the reasons for which the rules exist sometimes can and must override the rules themselves” (p. 104).
 - but they give no examples from Scripture. (Example: mother telling child not to touch pot on stove)
 - b. “Thou shalt not kill” is a rule but the deeper principle is “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39) (p. 103).
 - c. Deeper than principles are “basic convictions” – “core theological – basic – convictions.” These consist of “God’s character, actions and will” (p. 106).
 - d. “The rules that Jesus taught are needed, they are binding, and they are to be obeyed. Exceptions are to be considered as a last, rather than a first, resort. A legitimate exception to a rule will exist only if it is grounded in a principle or another rule that Jesus also taught, or that is found in Scripture. And all actions and moral judgments must pass the basic-conviction test related to the character and will of God as revealed supremely in Jesus Christ” (p. 111).
 - 5. Not all writers agree with these views: see John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*: “So I must conclude that there are no tragic moral choices, no conflicts of duties.” (p. 233; see pp. 230-234).

B. Response to these views:

1. Note how weakly grounded they are in Scripture.
 - a. Where is any example of Jesus breaking a command of Scripture?
 - Geisler mentions Sabbath commandment: Matt. 12:5 “the priests . . . profane the Sabbath and are guiltless.”
 - Answer: this was contrary to later rabbinic interpretation, not to Scripture itself. Similarly: healing on Sabbath.
 - b. Many examples of Jesus being without sin, nobody able to convict him of sin:
 - Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? (John 8:46)
 - I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. (John 15:10)
 - He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. (1 Peter 2:22)
 - Geisler’s answer: These were not sin, because there was an “exemption” from one obligation in order to obey another (p. 131). Response: No first-century Jew would have thought that way about the commands of God in the OT. “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Especially Jesus’ enemies!
 - c. The narrative examples of people telling a lie are not necessarily held up to us as examples to imitate.

(There is in each case another explanation that does not require ethical hierarchicalism.)

Rahab (Josh. 2): a Canaanite prostitute, recent convert, no ethical teaching.

Egyptian midwives (Exod. 1:19): did not kill baby Hebrew boys. Again, had no ethical teaching. Amazing courage. Perhaps not lies.

-- other examples: there are good alternative explanations.

2. This view is so foreign to Scripture: Where is anything in Scripture that encourages us to find out which commands we might have to disobey at times?
 - a. This kind of thinking comes from philosophical reasoning, but not from Scripture.
 - b. My response to Geisler, p. 95, margin: Your whole problem is that you start with Plato and Kant rather than with the Bible. The moral absolute in Scripture is not truth-telling at all time but rather not lying (silence is option). And it is not "protect life" but "do not murder" (sometimes you are not responsible).
 - c. Note how often Scripture commends to us keeping all the commands of God
Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! ² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, (Psalm 119:1-2). → all of Ps. 119!
All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
 - d. This view would make God command us to do contradictory things (from Frame, p. 232.)
3. The promise of 1 Cor. 10:13: Paul seems to assure Christians that they will not face this kind of situation:
No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)
4. The example of Christ should encourage us:
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)
-- no example anywhere of Christ disobeying any command of OT
or else it must follow that there were times when Jesus affirmed a falsehood.
and this => the one who was truly God, who cannot lie, told a lie.
→ this is a great difficulty with saying there are times when God wants us to lie, to do a greater good
5. The supposed examples where people "had no choice" but to disobey Scripture have better explanations.
 - a. Usually: a better, more mature and careful understanding of what Scripture actually commands.
 - b. Leaving light on when you go away: not violating command against lying (Ex 20:16; Col 3:9)
 - c. Stealing enemy's battle plan in war: A "just war" involves taking much life, property from enemy.
-- The command against stealing does not prevent a soldier serving a good government from taking property from evil aggressor. (1 Sam. 31:12: Israelite soldiers took bodies of Saul and sons from Philistines)
 - d. Killing in (just) war is not violating "You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13), when rightly understood.
6. Better summary of our moral obligations:
→ Obey the whole Bible as it is rightly understood and as it applies to your situation. These are commands of God given to us for our good and for us to obey.
7. Examples from "hard cases" (Nazis and Jews, or starving family, or overcrowded lifeboat) become a wedge to persuade people (esp. college students) of moral relativism.
8. Immorality as a result of hierarchicalism: Telling Christians they have to figure out some complicated "hierarchy" of moral obligations will usually result in a mushy moral backbone and weak convictions.
Example: College students especially will quickly become skilled at rationalization of all their immoral activities – they don't have to honor their parents, tell the truth, stay morally pure, because "personal acts which promote personhood are better than those which do not" (Geisler, p. 120). And "persons are more valuable than things" (p. 115), so why not lie to employer to cover for a friend? etc.
→ Inviting complicated rationalizations is a shortcut to immoral behavior
Better: Obey what God says in Scripture.
9. The underlying problem: Reasoning from secular philosophical ethics based on "conflicting duties" rather than simply obeying the infinite wisdom and absolute authority of God in His Word.
The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. ¹¹
Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11)
10. Sum: our task is not easy, but it is possible: Understand and obey the whole Bible!

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