

BIBLICAL RELATIVISM

“graded absolutes”

Key question

Is there a Biblical relativism and how might it be different from radical relativism?

Key text

Hebrews 11:31

“By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.”

Key Definition

God’s Will

God’s Will is His intention for His creation, of which there are parts declared, parts which are dynamic, and parts which are decreed.

Introduction

1. Is it ever appropriate to lie, steal or break one of the other moral “absolutes?”
 - a. A missionary is imprisoned in a Latin American country on a trumped-up charge. His fellow missionaries can free him if they bribe the police (which is a common practice, but illegal). Bribing is strictly forbidden by the mission authorities. What should they do? Let’s say three years have passed. Let’s say he is being tortured. Let’s say that the family and children of the imprisoned man are suffering because of his situation. Are there any situations that would warrant a bribe?
 - b. A young Christian student feels strongly that his nation (Germany 1942) is engaged in an immoral war. He defies his government and refuses to fight. Is he doing the right thing? Let’s put him in the USA in 1965 — protesting the Vietnam War. Does that make a difference? Why?
2. As we face complex moral challenges we can make one of two mistakes.
 - a. We can make God too big and the moral challenge too small. That is, we can belittle the complexity of the moral challenges we face.
 - b. We can make the moral challenge too big and God too small. That is, we can start with the assumption that God’s revelation is not sensitive enough to apply to the really tough moral challenges of life.
3. Most lies fall into a spectrum of three broad categories.

- a. **Lies to cause harm** —
 - 1. “Trust me on this one.”
 - 2. “You surely shall not die.” Gen. 3:4
 - b. **Lies to protect the liar** —
 - 1. “The dog ate my homework.”
 - 2. Greed (“Things go better with Coke.”), and fear (“I didn’t do it.”) are the big incentives here.
 - 3. “I do not know the man” Matt.26:74
 - c. **Lies to protect others** —(two categories)
 - 1. Social grace —
 - 1) “I love your dress.”
 - 2) In this context, people want to be fooled.
 - 2. Social necessity —
 - 1) Rahab in Joshua 2
 - 2) In some cases, this is a matter of life and death.
4. Good decisions should pass the test of all three questions raised by St Thomas Aquinas.
 - a. Does the Scripture address the issue directly?
 - b. Is your motive one of selfless love or is it fear, anger, etc.? A technical conformity to the letter of the law without a loving heart is no virtue.
 - c. Is the timing right? A good deed or word done at the wrong time and in the wrong setting can be more harmful than helpful.
 5. Three common mistakes.
 - a. **Legalism** - respects only the first point (above) “What does the manual tell me I am to do?”
 - a. **Subjectivism** - respects only the second point (above). “If my motives are loving, my actions will be virtuous.”
 - b. **Situationalism** - respects only the third (above). “Do what is right for you.”
 6. The “sleep – test” ethic says that if you can sleep well after a decision it is probably a good one. This test raises some questions however.
 - a. Does the “right thing” always condition our conscience?
 - b. Is the individualism that this test implies a sound basis for moral decisions?
 - c. Can we assume that a good conscience can be developed in a community context that does not encourage virtues like – courage, justice, prudence, and temperance?
 - d. Is it not true that often our conscience pulls us in different directions?
 - e. How does one justify a decision to others without a rationale that is bigger than “It feels right”?

Note: The key to a valid “sleep – test” ethic is the development of character.

A. We should respect the fact that moral absolutes can be understood in different ways.

1. **Unqualified Absolutism** — Moral conflicts are only apparent, not real. God will provide a way out — I Cor.10:13. This is often associated with **Anabaptist** tradition.

2. **Conflicting Absolutism** — Moral conflicts are real and demand that we do the lesser evil and ask God's forgiveness for our sin. This is often associated with **Lutheran** tradition.
3. **Graded Absolutism** (contextual absolutism) — Moral conflicts are real and demand that we do the greater good based upon a hierarchy of values. In this case, no guilt is involved. This is often associated with **Reformed** tradition.

B. Graded absolutes result from a number of observations.

1. **Higher and lower moral laws exist.**
 - a. The "least" (**Matt.5:19**) and "greatest" commandments (**Matt.22:36**).
 - b. The "weightier" matters of the Law (**Matt.23:23**).
 - c. The "greater sin" of Judas (**Jn.19:11**).
 - d. The "greatest" virtue (**I Cor.13:13; Jn.15:13**).
 - e. Degrees of punishment and reward (**Matt.5:22; Rom.2:6; Rev. 20:12; I Cor.3:11f**).
 - f. Degrees of Church discipline (**I Cor.5, 11:30**).
2. **Unavoidable moral conflicts exist.**
 - a. Abraham is commanded to kill his son Isaac (**Gen.22**).
 - b. Samson is instructed by God to commit suicide (**Jud.16:30**).
 - c. Jephthah is instructed by God to sacrifice his daughter (on vows to God). (**Jud. 11**) (Note also Eccl. 5:1-4 on vows to God).
 - d. Rahab lies to protect the Hebrew spies and is commended for it (**Josh.2; Jas.2:25**).
 - e. The Hebrew midwives disobey the King to protect Moses and are rewarded (**Ex.1:15-17**).
 - f. Daniel disobeyed civil government (**Dan.3,6**).
 - g. The apostles refused to obey Jewish authorities and preached the gospel (**Acts 5:29**).
 - h. David and his men stole consecrated bread to save their lives (**Matt.12:3-4**).
3. **Examples of graded absolutes:**
 - a. Love for God over love for man — **Matt.22:34f**.
 - b. Obey God over human government — **Acts 5:29**.
 - c. Life-saving mercy over truth telling — **Josh.2**.
 - d. Sanctity of life over sanctity of property — When a fireman breaks into a house (destroys property) to save a life, he is not guilty of abusing someone else's property.
4. **No guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.**
 - a. It is not logical that God would hold someone responsible for what was in fact impossible.
 - b. The Scripture gives examples of people who are praised for keeping the higher demands of the law while violating the lesser demands (Matt. 12:3-4). Nowhere is there a hint of guilt in these cases.
5. **Jesus' treatment of the Sabbath – Mark 2:23-28.**

"²³ And it came about that He was passing through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to Him, "See here, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and became hungry, he and his companions: ²⁶ how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat

except the priests, and he gave it also to those who were with him?" 27 And He was saying to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

- a. Jesus gives two examples of where a strict interpretation of Ex.35:2 is trumped by basic common sense and human needs.
- b. Jesus indicates that the Sabbath is to enhance human life not make it more difficult. This implies that there are situations that may demand exceptions to the strict interpretation of Sabbath proscriptions.
- c. Jesus bears witness to his divinity by claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath. Only God could alter the Sabbath Law ordained by God – Ex.20:8-11.

C. **Objections to graded absolutes need to be faced and answered.**

1. **How does graded absolutism differ from situational ethics?**

- a. Situationalism holds that there are **no moral absolutes** with substantive content; graded absolutism does.
- b. Situationalism holds that there is only **one mandate** — love. Graded absolutism recognizes **many mandates**.
- c. Situationalism holds that the circumstances alone determine what should be done. Graded absolutism recognizes that **circumstance is only one of the determining factors**.

2. **In what sense is Graded Absolutism an absolute?**

- a. It is absolute in its **source** — God.
- b. Each command is absolute in its **sphere**.
- c. It can be described as a **“qualified”** absolute.

3. **Did Jesus ever respect higher laws over lower laws?**

- a. He obeyed God over his parents — Luke 2:49
- b. He healed on the Sabbath — Mark 2:23-28
- c. In going to the cross, He put mercy over social justice.

4. **If love is the greatest commandment, how are we to define love?**

- a. It is love of God as well as love of man that is important. This suggests that obeying God's commandments is important.
- b. I Cor.13:4-7 gives us a practical test of true love.
 - Is Patient -
 - Is Kind -
 - Is not jealous -
 - Does not brag and is not arrogant -
 - Does not act unbecomingly -
 - Does not seek its own -
 - Is not provoked -
 - Does not take into account a wrong suffered -
 - Does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth -
 - Bears all things -
 - Believes all things -

- Hopes all things -
- Endures all things -

Pastoral advice

Is it ever God's will to disobey His moral law?

1. The answer to this question requires us to ask another question - What constitutes the moral law of God in a particular situation?
2. St. Thomas Aquinas suggested three criteria for moral decision making. Do you agree or disagree and why?
 - a.) Does the Scripture address the issue directly?
 - b.) Is your motive one of selfless love or is it fear, anger, etc.? A technical conformity to the letter of the law without a loving heart is no virtue.
 - c.) Is the timing right? A good deed done at the wrong time and in the wrong setting can be more harmful than helpful.

Good decisions should pass the test of all three questions.

3. There is indication in Deut.24:1-4, and Matt.19:8 that God respects the validity of "damage control" with respect to some moral dilemmas.