

Ethics Week 1 - Intro and The Imitation Model

For the first module of this semester we're going to be looking at ethics. **Now, when I mention that word 'ethics' what do you think of?**

- Medical ethics
- Ethical business practices
- Right and wrong behaviours

Really, ethics is about the disciplined reflection on choices, or decision making; about distinguishing between right and wrong and choosing the right.

But... it's a bit more complicated than that.

Look at the account of Mary and Martha in **Luke 10:38-42**

DQ: what has that got to do with ethics and decision making?

Ethics is not just about choosing between right and wrong, good and bad, as between **good and better**.

In choosing to serve, Martha's not chosen something evil or bad. It's the opposite. To serve is good. But, in this situation, Mary has chosen the better.

And so, on a personal level, ethics is about making better choices, so we can live better lives.

Group case study:

The kind of decisions we make are often small and relatively minor.

But let's leap into the deep end!

Elderly relative with an incurable medical condition. She requests you make contact for her with a euthanasia service.

How are you going to decide what to do? What's feeding into your decision making?

And we're basing this module on the book *Choose Better*. It's author T David Gordon presents 5 models for how to approach decision making:

5 models:

- The Imitation Model
- The Law Model
- The Wisdom Model
- The Communion Model
- The Warfare Model

And each model gets us to ask a different question about the decision in front of us.

And each model complements the others. So, it's not that you pick one and make that you're model for life. 'I'm a warfare guy', 'well I'm a wisdom gal'.

Instead, just like when you're fixing something, you need more than one tool, you can't do everything with a spanner or a pair of pliers, you need a tool box. So with decision making, if we want to make wise, godly, life-enhancing decisions we need a tool box to help us.

Not least because, as we'll see, each model has its strengths and weaknesses.

And this morning, I'm going to give a very brief summary of each model, and then we're going to look at the Imitation Model in more detail.

Brief Overview

1. The Imitation Model:

You and I have been created in the image of God and so we can, and should, reflect God's attributes and character in the world.

And so this model asks the question: **'Does this decision, or one of the options before me, allow me to emulate God or cultivate character traits that reflect his image?'**

2. The Law Model

It recognises that God has authority over creation and over us. And life consists in obeying him.

And so the question it asks is: 'Has God commanded or prohibited this or that behaviour/choice that's in front of me at the moment?'

Asking that keeps us from just making decisions on a subjective or emotional basis.

DQ: But... what are some dangers with such an approach?

1. It can make us pharisaical
2. Because it emphasises what we *do* rather than who we *are*, we can tick ethical boxes without being very Christlike.
3. An attitude of law keeping can make things that should be matters of wisdom into matters of obedience: We *command* when we should really simply *commend*.

3. The Wisdom Model

This considers that we can observe life and learn from it, and by learning make wise choices that contribute to well-being.

So it asks the question: What is the likely outcome of my/our doing, or not doing, this?

DQ: Which book of the Bible advances this approach?

Book of Proverbs.

4. The Communion Model

This model considers that life consists in communion/relationship with God.

And so it asks the question: How might this option enhance or inhibit my communion/fellowship/relationship with God?

DQ: What's the danger of that kind of approach
subjectivity, and can descend into mysticism.

5. The Warfare Model

DQ: Why might there be such a model?

Ever since the Fall, there is an ongoing conflict between the seed of the woman and seed of the serpent. And we're enlisted on one side or other.

The question it asks is: 'in the often invisible, yet real warfare between the forces of good and evil, will this decision serve the forces of good or those of evil?'

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I hope you can see already that each is incomplete without the other. And a biblically informed life will make use of each model.

Group DQ: which model do you tend to default to, or use most?

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The Imitation Model

When faced with a decision of what to do/not do, this model asks the question: Does this decision allow me/us to emulate God or to cultivate human traits that reflect his image?

Of the available options before me, does one provide greater opportunity than the others to cultivate the image of God within, or the garden of God without/outside?

DQ: What's the biblical basis for such an approach to decision making?

The Biblical basis for the Imitation Model

Group DQ: Look at these verses and give me a one sentence summary of them all.

Genesis 1:26 - "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

Lev 19:2: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."

Matt 5:44-45, 48: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. *For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good...* you therefore much be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect."

John 13:34 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: *just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*'

Eph 5:1: '*Be imitators of God, as beloved children.*'

We are made in God's image and we should imitate him - in his holiness, love, mercy.

We are *imago Dei*... and as a result we are also to be *imitatio Dei* - imitators of God.

Arguably, you could summarise the whole of Paul's ethical teaching, on how we are to behave as Christians, as 'imitate me as I imitate Christ.' I'm imitating Jesus, imitate me and do the same.

[1 Cor 11:1 Be imitators of me as I am of Christ

Phil 3:17 - join in imitating me

2 Thess 3:7 - how you ought to imitate us]

DQ: what are some advantages of this model?

1. It emphasises who we are *becoming*, not just what we are *doing*.
2. It restores worship to ethics - we worship when we admire and want to become like God.

The Foundation of Christian Ethics

Arguably, all the other models of decision making depend on this one: on us being made in God's image and becoming like him.

And throughout church history it has been seen as foundational:

Look at this quote from Augustine:

(Confessions): 'Why are you proud, O man? God became low for you. You would perhaps be ashamed to imitate a lowly man; then at least imitate the lowly God.'

DQ: What point is Augustine making?

Pride is the root of all sin, the root of all wrong decision making. And we are proud, and the answer is that we should imitate God whom made himself low.

Richard Sibbes: 'Christ is our pattern, whom we must strive to imitate.' How should we live? By imitating Christ.

Richard Baxter: 'Fix your eye upon himself as your pattern, and study with earnest desire to follow his holy example, and be made conformable to him.'

The Imitation Model and Human Nature

Interestingly of course, by our very nature we tend to learn more by imitation than by critical reflection.

To illustrate how we learn by imitation, Gordon, author of *Choose Better*, uses the example of an 8yr old boy who goes fishing for the very first time with his grandpa. Grandpa doesn't have to tell him anything - but when he opens the boot/trunk of the car and there are two rods, one big, one small, and the grandpa takes the big one, the boy just naturally copies and takes the smaller. Same with the two boxes of tackle, one big, one small, grandpa takes the big and he takes the small. He follows grandpa as he walks down the pier. Copies him as he baits the hook, casts into the lake, and sits down. Not a word is spoken, but the grandson just imitates.

So it is with us and God. We discern what is praiseworthy, excellent and noble about him and we imitate it.

We become as he is and do as he does.

But...

look at **3 John 1:11** -

'Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good.'

DQ what does this verse tell us?

Our human nature can imitate vice as well as virtue.

Which means, we need a means of identifying what is virtuous and imitating that.

How the Imitation Model Functions

And the answer is, we're to imitate God in his **character traits** and his **deeds**.

Go back to the creation/cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

So, just as God exercised dominion over the universe so we're to do the same.

And in Genesis 2:15 we read, *'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.'*

So just as God created and sustains the universe, so we're to create and cultivate. To copy him in his care of the world.

So,

1. we're to cultivate the image of God within

And

2. We're to cultivate the garden of God without.

And so, again, faced with available options, we ask:

Does one provide greater opportunity than the other/s to cultivate the image of God within or the garden of God without?

So... group case study - Leisure time or Euthanasia

You have some choices before you:

1. Learn to play/play chess, or take out a Netflix subscription?
2. Join the individual athletics team or the team sport team?

3. Aim to travel the world or holiday stay put in your home country?

Or,
your response to your elderly relative interested in euthanasia.

How might the Imitation Model influence your decision making?

Leisure:

Does one form of recreation contribute to the cultivation of the garden or the image of God more than another form?

Forms of recreation/leisure that are active, creating, enable learning of traits God displays and values, is better than sitting passively watching Netflix.

We might also cultivate those things that humans alone can do, instead of mere animal traits:

- creativity, wisdom, language, rationality, imagination, love of beauty etc - as opposed to strength or speed. Those things that are unique to us as humans.

Holidaying: you could argue it's good to see and enjoy the variety of God's world, or be rooted as Jesus was, or care for the planet by not flying.

Imitating God's traits and deeds

1. His Traits

To imitate God is not just to *occasionally* do what he would do - i.e. act justly. But to become like him. So that our *external* behaviours conform to who we are on the *inside*.

Obviously, some of God's traits/attributes cannot be imitated - his *incommunicable* attributes: he is eternal and infinite, creating ex nihilo. We are not/cannot.

But the imitation model encourages us to sustained careful thinking and discussion of God's attributes that we can imitate. Like...

DQ: What traits can we imitate?

faithfulness
goodness
kindness
jealousy
love.

Group DQ: Think of justice:

How might those in positions of authority - parents, managers/supervisors, teachers/professors, imitate God's justice in their decision making?

Parents : (rewarding/punishing without partiality)

Managers/supervisors : (assessing others' work impartially and rewarding it impartially)

Teachers and professors: (grading impartially)

DQ: what things might hinder us from cultivating impartial justice and so fail to display it in our decision making?

False sympathy. When we're evaluating whether what someone has done is right or wrong, sympathy does not help us. If we have to come to a judgment on something as being right or wrong, we should not consider 'but how will that person feel about it?'

Fear of man - inevitably perverts justice

Partiality - we cannot allow personal considerations to influence our judgments. Whether considering friend or foe we must be impartial, because God is.

2. His Deeds

Broadly, all God has done falls into four categories:

- He creates
- He judges what he has created
- He providentially sustains what he has created
- He redeems his creation

So in each moment/at each point of decision ask:

Is there an opportunity here to be like our making, judging, preserving, repairing/redeeming God?

He makes, therefore we are to be creative. Does one option enable this more?

He judges, so we judge, evaluate, critique - how does this thing work? Could it be better?
Does one option allow me to exercise this more?

He sustains, so we're to be good stewards. Does one option better enable good stewardship of what he has entrusted to us?

He redeems, so we are to. Is there an option that enables me to rescue, redeem, show mercy, forgiveness?

At each point of decision we're being encouraged to consider our highest calling - to imitate God.

But...

It's not fast! It calls us to spend a lifetime studying the character of God.

So... DQs:

Why do we need an intimate and growing knowledge of God to employ this model?

How can you foster this knowledge of God in your life?

How does our fallen nature negatively impact our ability to employ this model?