

# What is Moral Relativism?

## Article 2 of 2: Jesus' View of Morality

By Robert A. Mimiaga

Welcome back to the second and final article of *What is Moral Relativism?* In our last article, we reviewed some examples of moral relativism played out in our culture; we also gained some understanding of when this theory originated and discussed the destructive influence it has on today's culture. To ensure we are on the same page, let me begin by reviewing some key definitions related to this topic:

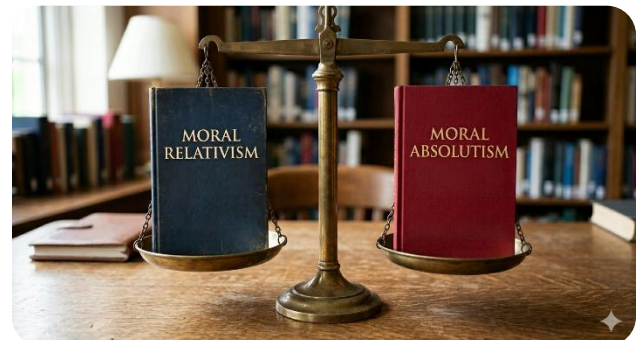
- **Morals** are personal or societal rules that establish what is right and wrong.
- **Morality** is a framework or system that helps someone determine right from wrong.
- **Moral Relativism** is the belief that morals are not absolute or objective but may change with a person's or culture's beliefs and circumstances.

As discussed in the prior article, when we analyze our society's ideas, practices, and norms existing around us, we see the influence moral relativism plays out in people's statements, habits, and actions. Unfortunately, there are times when the influence of moral relativism is so deceptively knitted into the fabric of our society that it is hard to identify. This is where perspectives from Christian scholars and theologians can help us to recognize the forest

for the trees, or more simply, to see the bigger picture.

### Scholarly Views of Moral Relativism

J. P. Moreland is an American philosopher, theologian, and Christian apologist. He is a distinguished professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in La Mirada, California (my alma mater). In his book titled *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, Moreland identifies a key flaw in the theory of moral relativism when he argues that if moral relativism is true, then it is difficult to see how one society can be justified in morally blaming another society in certain cases. According to moral relativism, I should act in keeping with my society's code, and others should act in keeping with their society's codes. If someone does an act that is right in his code but wrong in mine, how can I criticize his act as wrong?<sup>1</sup> If morality is relative, then each society's judgments are equally valid.



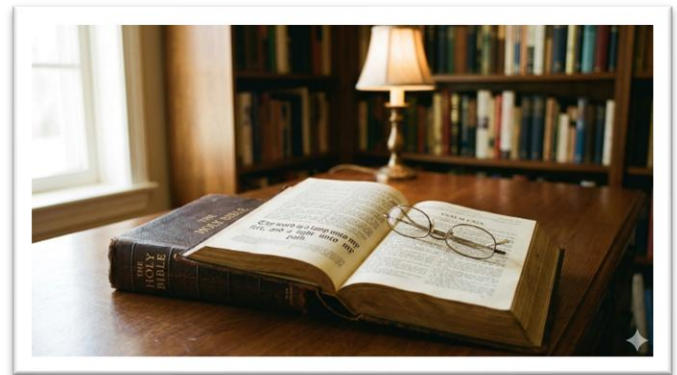
In another section of his book, Moreland questions, "What about an individual that simultaneously is a member of several different societies that may hold different moral values? Which is our nuclear family, our extended family, our neighborhood, school, church, and workplace. Which societies are relevant? What if I am simultaneously a member of two societies and one allows but the other forbids a certain moral action? What do I do in that case?"<sup>2</sup> Both of Moreland's arguments present the inconsistency or self-refutation of moral relativism.

Another Christian systematic theologian, philosopher, and apologist, Norman L. Geisler (1932-2019), also agreed with the logical self-refutation of moral relativism. In his book, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, Geisler wrote, "Moral relativism is self-defeating, for it makes a universal claim that there are no universal moral truths. If all truth is relative, then the statement 'all truth is relative' cannot be absolutely true. Thus, relativism refutes itself."<sup>3</sup>

In the last article we explored the adverse effects that moral relativism has on our modern culture. Yet it seems to lack logic in many societal responses. Donald Arthur Carson, a Canadian evangelical theologian and distinguished emeritus professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and president and co-founder of the Gospel Coalition, wrote, "One of the most disturbing features of contemporary Western culture is the triumph of moral relativism. People increasingly believe that all moral judgments are merely personal or cultural preferences. This stance, however, cannot adequately deal with moral outrage or injustice."<sup>4</sup> Although many people are drawn to the freedoms of moral relativism, Carson highlights its inability to adequately account for real moral evil when it manifests in the world. The acts of a serial killer, or rape of a child, are horrific and repulsive to all people, no matter their society or culture.

## What is the Biblical Perspective?

The apostle Paul defended the notion that there is a moral code or law that transcends all people's groups and generations. In other words, moral knowledge is universal, not relative. The apostle Paul wrote, "*Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.*" (Romans 2:14-15). Paul was proclaiming that human conscience reflects a shared moral law and that we are all accountable for our behavior, based on one set of moral principles that God has created.



In the Old Testament, the Book of Judges gives us a clear picture of practical moral relativism repeated in the lives of the Israelites and the consequences of this behavior. In Judges 21:24-25, we read, "*At that time the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance. In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*" Elsewhere in the Book of Judges, we can read that these Israelites spiraled into a society of violence, injustice, and chaos, causing great harm to themselves and others.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah told the Israelites, *“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”* (Jeremiah 31:33). In this passage, the prophet Jeremiah was referring to the Mosaic Law established in the time of Moses, representing God’s absolute moral principles given over 3,500 years ago and still binding for Christians today.

There exist many other passages in the Scriptures that speak to the absoluteness of God’s morality, which was established for humanity to follow. But as the Son of God—God Himself—what did Jesus teach about absolute morality as recorded in Scripture?

### **Jesus’ View of Morality**

Jesus taught that absolute morality should be based on the Word of God and the principle of love. All of the moral laws Jesus taught rest on this foundation. Let’s look at some of Jesus’ statements in the gospels to gain an understanding of his position on morality. First, in the gospel of Matthew, we find a conversation between the disciples and Jesus, who was explaining to them about End Times events to occur in the future. Jesus warned them to be on the lookout for the signs indicating the start of these events and concluded with the following profound statement: ***“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”*** (Matthew 24:35) In this passage, Jesus proclaimed his words of morality were permanent and unchanging, which contrasts with moral relativism’s belief that moral ethics and moral rules evolve with time or culture. Jesus’ declaration is the foundation of permanence for all his commands recorded in the gospels about morality and the nature of God and Christ himself.

The scholar D. A. Carson, who is a theologian and distinguished emeritus professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

and president and co-founder of the Gospel Coalition, wrote the following remark about this passage: “The authority of the Lord Jesus stands behind these words (Matt. 24:35): ***‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.’*** This is the same authority of God himself, showing that Jesus’ teachings are to be trusted for all generations.”<sup>5</sup> In his remarks, Carson emphasizes that Jesus’ words are divinely authoritative and enduring, transcending cultural and time changes.

Another theologian, author, and pastor, John F. MacArthur, author of *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, made the following observation about this passage: “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law, that is, His Word, to fail. The Word of God, particularly the teachings of Christ, is unbreakable and eternal.”<sup>6</sup>

As Christians, if we claim to believe the authority and authenticity of Jesus Christ as God and recognize God as immutable and absolute in all his ways, then we must hold our ground as our culture increasingly drifts toward moral relativism. We must believe that the Word of God represents the absolute and unchanging truth God has intended to reveal to us. So, if the entire Word of God (the Bible) is morally objective, then the laws or commandments contained in the Bible must also be. Let’s examine what Jesus has to say about the commandments of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the crowd with explanations about God’s moral law, not to change them, but to show their true intent, as he speaks about anger as murder of the heart (Matthew 5:21-22) and lust as adultery of the heart (Matthew 5:27-28). These passages emphasize the preservation of God’s laws over time.

Jesus also claimed to be *the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6). In a direct challenge to relativism, Jesus indirectly declared that truth is not plural or changing but personal and absolute, grounded in Christ himself. Jesus affirms that morality flows from God's unchanging character, not the desires of humans in a personal or cultural setting. Each of Christ's statements speaks to the eternity of God's Word, a truth he taught throughout his ministry, helping us gain a deeper understanding of his view of the absolute morality of God's laws and commands.

### **Our Response as Christians**

As Christians, how are we to respond to our culture's moral relativism we are confronted with today? As Christians, I believe we must apply these unchanging truths in our lives in obedience to Christ. We must first recognize that God's moral law reflects God's nature; therefore, it cannot be amended by human opinion or social evolution. It stands above culture, not within it. Secondly, God's moral principles should be used as a foundation for the way we think and act in our culture. For example, when it comes to our civil laws, Jesus desires that we use his moral principles to be the foundation for the civil laws we use to govern ourselves. Francis Schaeffer described this combination well in his book, *A Christian Manifesto*: "The law of God is the only sufficient basis for law, and the state is to be the instrument for carrying out justice in the framework of that law. But within that framework, laws must change as new situations arise."<sup>7</sup> Applying this to an example in our modern culture, the moral principle to "protect human life" never changes, while the civil laws that express it must adapt to modern realities, whether that involves regulating medical practices, artificial intelligence, or digital privacy.

Critics often point to the differing civil laws among nations and cultures as evidence that moral standards vary from place to place. Yet, if every society built its laws on the same

foundational moral truths that God has given mankind, their legal systems would be in harmony and consistent in principle, even if not identical in detail due to differing circumstances within their own cultures.

The same absolute morality must guide every aspect of our lives, including how we interact with friends and enemies, navigate modern cultural norms, respond to technological changes, evaluate what we encounter online, and uphold human dignity, fairness, truth, and responsibility. In order to confidently identify the moral relativism that exists in our culture, we need to become more familiar with God's Word and his moral laws. That means spending time reading the Bible and using it to question every instance of questionable behavior we see in the culture around us. With the same fervor that the Bereans tested the teachings of the apostle Paul (Acts 17:10-12), we need to examine the teachings and beliefs of our modern-day *prophets* and weigh them against the immutable Word of God to determine its soundness and validity.

Finally, our interpretation of God's absolute morals must be understood and valued as a blessing in our lives. We have a Heavenly Father who is a God of love, as confirmed through his nature and his Word. Therefore, we must always recognize that God's absolute morals have been established to guide us, protect us, bless us, and enrich our lives.

For the complete set of ***Moral Relativism*** articles, visit my Library:

***Library: Moral Relativism***

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<sup>1</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Carson, D. A. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8: Matthew and Mark. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, p. 496.

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24–28*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1981), p. 51.