We come now to lesson three in our study of Christian ethics. In the first lesson we spent some time doing an overview of our understanding of the moral revolution and what some of the contributory causes were as well as working on a few of the major distinctions and words that will help us in doing the discipline of ethics. As you recall ethics deals basically with three things; the theory of obligation, theory of value and theory of motivation. In our second lecture we spent some time understanding the poll positions in philosophy from which ethics has come. We did a discussion of naturalism and its impact as a reductionistic approach. And then we looked at idealism, which is a form of dualism and found that it is possible to have absolute ethics on a base other than the God of the Bible.

Today we want to review some of the materials that would put this together in the systems form and evaluate in particular the materials that have been produced by Norman Geisler in his book entitled Christian Ethics Options and Issues. Dr. Geisler evaluates ethical systems under a series of major headings. The first one he calls antinomianism. That is, systems who reject any kind of nomos or law for the criteria for the evaluation of right and wrong. Under this he basically lists two ethical and philosophical systems: existentialism which he argues as a post-rational antinomian system and the content of logical positivism or linguistic analysis.

If you start with the normless base, obviously you move toward subjectivity and relativity in ethics. The existentialistic ethics certainly had a big impact in our country beginning in the 1960s. This ethic probably became popular through the medium of music and especially the rock musicians. Existentialism argues that the world is ultimately absurd and that meaning, as well as, value is self chosen by the agent who creates himself by his choices. There is no ultimate standard, and it really doesn’t matter what you choose to create yourself to be because after you die your life
just becomes a part of all of the meaningless passion of all lives; it will never bring order, it will never bring reason or understanding or morality to the world. Such a negative form of understanding certainly didn’t last long within the framework of our culture.

Geisler goes on and lists a second system of ethics which he calls generalism and under this in particular, he wishes to evaluate all the forms of utilitarianism that have existed in Western philosophy. Whether it’s the quantitative utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham or the qualitative utilitarianism of Jon Stuart Mill. Under the heading of generalism, he suggests that there are no universal norms that generally there are rules that help you make ethical decisions. But there are no universal norms. We will discuss utilitarianism rather thoroughly when we look at it as one of the theories of obligation.

His third system is situationism. And this of course is the system of Joseph Fletcher, and many of us have made the mistake of asserting that Joseph Fletcher in an antinomian, that he has no ultimate standards, that he is a total relativist and therefore there are no absolutes in his system. I would like to suggest to you that that’s a false evaluation of situation ethics. Frankly, Joseph Fletcher does have a universal absolute, that universal absolute is love. Love is something of a criteria that is applied to all moral decisions based upon the consequences of the decision. The system operates very simply. When you face a moral choice, you have to predict which alternative that is open before you will maximize love to the most number of people. Whatever maximizes love is your moral duty. It is not only your duty, it is obligatory, that is if you do not do it then you have sinned.

So although Joseph Fletcher is relativistic in his situationism he does have one universal absolute; the absolute is very general in its content. In other words, if you evaluate all the alternatives before you and you must determine which one maximizes love for the most amount of people, that’s a very difficult task because to maximize looks like a quantitative structure. How do you quantitatively understand maximizing love? What is a unit of love? How do you describe a unit of love so that although it sounds like a system that might be easy to use, quite frankly, it is not easy to use because the general universal guiding principle is kind of contentless and very general and therefore does not give explicit help in particular circumstances. Joseph Fletcher understood one thing very, very well. He understood that if you had more than one universal you would always have problems with the other
universals coming into conflict with each other and therefore Joseph Fletcher chose to develop what he considered to be the Christian ethic of love on a single ultimate absolute principle and that is in every moral choice it is your obligation to choose the alternative that maximizes love.

He pointed out that in any multiple-rule system you always have the problem of those rules coming into conflict. For instance, let's take the Ten Commandments as a multiple rules system. If indeed you owe God your complete and total allegiance based upon the First Commandment, and you have that allegiance that is centered in the fact that that allegiance includes keeping sabbath, and yet, keeping sabbath is difficult because of employment, how do you both honor God and care for your family without violating one of the other of these precepts? There is something of value in what Fletcher pointed out, and that is this. Once you go to multiple rules there is always the possibility that these rules will come into conflict. When a conflict arises the difficulty is, you must either violate one of the other rules or get an exemption or exception from one of the other rules and/or find some new rules to cover the exceptions for when the rules come into conflict. Frankly, Joseph Fletcher's discussion of that pointed out one of the major difficulties that had existed in all forms of absolutistic ethics.

And Norman Geisler has picked up that concept and developed it rather thoroughly in a little book that he has written entitled, Contemporary Options in Christian Ethics. So, the last three of the criteria that he uses to organize ethical systems is to be found now in these three headings. There is ideal absolutism, which we'll discuss in a moment, there is conflicting absolutism, and there is what he calls his system hierarchicalism or graded absolutism.

Let's think first of all of non-conflicting absolutism. Is it possible to have an absolutistic system with multiple rules in it that will never come into conflict? Does that square with life and reality? Philosophically Plato would have been a good philosopher to illustrate a multiple rule system of ethics in which he held that these rules do not come into conflict.

Now it's important for us to understand what conflict means. A moral conflict is when your choices are limited to two alternatives and those two alternatives will cause you to violate one of the other of these moral precepts. Let me illustrate, if we took the notion that said that we have an absolute moral obligation to do everything we can do to nurture and preserve life. And number
two we took the moral precept that we should always be those who are truth tellers. Is it possible that truth telling and lifesaving could come into conflict? According to Plato it could not, yet many people will assert that in reality these things do come into moral conflict.

For instance take the story of Corrie ten Boom. When she is a young girl in Germany, where her father had built special cupboards in their house to hide Jewish family from the Nazis and the Gestapo was at the door and they were asking her if there are Jews harbored in the home Corrie ten Boom faced the moral conflict. If she was going to save the lives of these Jewish family then she will have to lie to the Gestapo, if she tells the truth to the Gestapo and obeys the commandment to keep truth then she is going to violate the commandment that says “Do all you can to nurture and preserve life.”

Now a moral conflict doesn’t mean a moral tension. Moral conflict means that the only possible choices you have, limit you to the violation of one of the other moral precepts that are part of your system. What Plato said was moral precepts do not go/come into conflict. In point of fact, they do not ever come into conflict, and therefore anytime they appeared to be in conflict you need to look for other alternatives that are there so you don’t have to end up violating one or the other of the moral precepts.

Now in theology there have been a few in the history of theology who have taken this position. The most well-known spokesman for the position in the recent history of the Church has been John Murray. John Murray espouses this position in his book Principles of (Christian) Conduct: [Aspects of Biblical Ethics] published by Eerdmans. John Murray argues that if one or the other of God’s laws come into moral conflict with another law that we are not thinking clearly and we have other alternatives that we could choose, for we are never left in the place were our only alternative is to sin. Now this viewpoint hasn’t been very popular with the contemporary Christian community and/or the academic Christian community.

The second position that deals with this is called ideal absolutism. In this position, it is argued that moral precepts do come into conflict, that it is very possible to have a conflict between truth telling and life-saving or between breaking and entry and stealing and saving lives. For example, if you are an operative in the CIA and by breaking and entering into a particular building you could
get your hands on a document that would enable the allies to save lives in a battle then indeed you have a decision to make about violating the law against stealing and/or violating the law against killing.

Now, what the ideal absolutist says that ideally these things don’t come into conflict. But in reality, under certain circumstances they do. And, when they come into conflict there is a particular stance that you ought to take; that instance goes like this. You must determine which of these two moral precepts that are in conflict, is the lesser evil. Once you determine which one is the lesser evil, then indeed that’s the one you ought to violate. When you violate it you are guilty of sin in violating that precept. Your right response after doing it is to confess your sin and to repent and forsake it and to be restored to fellowship with the living God.

This position has been espoused in the past by Erwin Lutzer, the Pastor of Moody Church, who espoused it in his book entitled The Morality Gap and then John Warwick Montgomery has also been an outstanding spokesperson for this position. Let me be sure you understand it. If you are an ideal absolutist you would say that normally you don’t face moral conflicts between God’s commands. On those rare occasions when you do face moral conflict, the first step is to determine which one is the lesser evil. In the illustrations we have used, it is kind of obvious.

The lesser evil would be to lie, that certainly is a lesser evil than causing people to die. So what Corrie ten Boom ought to do is violate the lower command that is, commit the lesser evil in order to do the higher good. But when she has done it she has committed sin and she must confess it and repent and forsake it. Then she’s reestablished with fellowship with God, and hopefully she doesn’t face many more moral conflicts.

One of the reasons that you have moral conflicts this position argues is because of antecedent sin. It is because of the presence of sin in the world. It is because a regime like the Nazis could come to power and with their racist superiority view the Jews with such hatred that they wished to exterminate them, it is because of that antecedent sin that Corrie was placed into that conflict mode. Sometimes that antecedent sin comes in your own life as well as in the corporate or the social life of a nation. Well that viewpoint does allow you to deal with moral conflicts, it’s an absolutetistic viewpoint, which are saying is that there are moral absolutes. Rarely do they come into conflict, when they do come
into conflict you must determine the lesser evil, violate that moral law, confess, be restored and then walk in obedience to all of God’s command.

The third position and the final general category that Geisler uses is his own position which he used to call hierarchicalism, but now he calls graded absolutism. In this position, you also have moral conflicts. That is, one or the other of God’s moral commands will come into conflict with each other. When that happens, you must make a decision about what you ought to do. Now Norman suggests that the best way to handle these kinds of things in the midst of moral conflict is to go through a process whereby we can grade God’s absolutes from higher to lower. That’s why his position is called graded absolutism.

He uses a lot of examples of moral conflicts that appear in the Bible. I’ll mention a few of them to you and you will be aware from your reading that there are many more than the ones that I’m going to mention in this lecture. He argues that Abraham and Isaac is an instance of moral conflict. God said don’t kill and yet God commanded Abraham to offer his son Isaac. It appears as if Abraham can’t keep both of those commands, and therefore he is caught in a moral conflict. Rahab is caught in a moral conflict when she has demonstrated her faith by hiding the spies and then the soldiers of her city come she can either tell a lie so the spies can escape or she can tell the truth and the spies would be captured. The midwives, the Jewish midwives in Egypt would be another example. Pharaoh said that the children, the male children were to be put to death on the birthing stool and it was the responsibility of the midwives to kill all male delivered babies. But the midwives said that when they got there to help with the delivery, the babies were already born, and therefore they lied in order to preserve life.

Now for Dr. Geisler it is unthinkable to say that the only possible choice you have in a moral conflict is to sin. He believes that in a moral conflict there must be some way to keep the higher good and still not violate the lower. His argument is kind of fascinating and goes like this. Was Jesus tested in every point like we are? And of course the answer is yes. Then the question comes, did Jesus face moral conflicts? Well if He’s tested in every point like we are and we face moral conflicts it would appear obvious that Jesus must have faced a moral conflict.
In point of fact, there are a number of them that are pointed out in His book. He faced the conflict as a young man, between parental control and being about His Father’s business in the temple. He faced a moral conflict between satisfying hunger and/or picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. And Norman Geisler suggests the greatest moral conflict He ever faced was the moral conflict of the cross when He submitted Himself to die an unjust death when He was actually guiltless; He had a moral conflict that He faced. Now we would all answer the question concerning did Jesus ever sin, negatively, we all believe in the impeccability of Christ. That is He never once violated any divine command. The conclusions should seem obvious, if Jesus faced moral conflicts and He never sinned than there must be a way to face a moral conflict and still not sin. And that’s what graded absolutism sets out to teach us.

That is, they are going to demonstrate to us that it is possible in a moral conflict not to sin. To do that there has to be a way to grade the absolutes. Instead of looking for the lesser evil you must grade God’s absolutes to find the higher good. And, in his first book on the subject he had a seven-fold graded hierarchy but in his more recent writings he has a three-fold graded hierarchy. The first one is this love for God is greater than love for man. Anytime the moral conflict comes between love of God and love of man then indeed one ought always to love God.

The second is that God is to be obeyed over government. And this of course would come from the book of Acts or from the events in the book of Daniel or things of that character. When the disciples were called in by the Sanhedrin and forbidden to preach in the name of Jesus they came out of there and said we must obey God rather than man. So that if the conflict ever comes between obedience to God and obedience to government, obedience to God is higher than obedience to government.

The third is that life-saving or mercy is higher than truth telling. That is if life-saving and truth telling come into conflict then life-saving is a hierarchally graded absolute that is above truth telling so that the three-fold standard allows you to determine in moral conflicts which is higher.

Let’s go back to Corrie ten Boom. For Corrie, instead of thinking about which is the lesser evil she ought to have been thinking about which is the higher good. And if she took this third criterion that is life-saving is higher than truth telling then she would have known that by lying she did her duty in life-saving. Now, Dr.
Geisler believes it is possible to apply this criteria in such a way that the person using it does not sin and has absolutely nothing to confess. Let’s say how that works out in the example.

When Corrie ten Boom said to the agents of the Gestapo at the door that they were not harboring any Jews, what she actually did was lie but this lie is justified because of the moral conflict and in lying she didn’t break any moral law. In point of fact, she is given an exemption to the lower law in order to keep the higher law. That’s an interesting notion—an exemption not an exception. When God’s moral laws come into conflict, if you fulfill or keep the higher one you are given an exemption to the lower one. This exemption to the lower one means that even though you lie you haven’t transgressed it because you’ve been given an exemption to it. So that when you have lied in order to save life, you have done that which is right, you have done your duty. That lie is justifiable and you have no guilt and you have absolutely nothing to confess. That’s the program of graded absolutism.

In graded absolutism we have to be able to say that God’s absolutes exist in a hierarchical order. And, if God’s absolutes exist in a hierarchical order, when there is conflict, all we have to do is determine which is higher. Once we know the higher one we are to keep it and God will give us an exemption to the lower one. So that if we actually lie we don’t break the lower one, were given an exemption and as a consequence of that exemption we have no guilt. We have done our duty, and Norman Geisler would argue that’s exactly what Jesus did when He faced moral conflicts and He’s our perfect moral example and we ought to follow Him.

Now this is an interesting position and it’s a growing position and it’s a position that I think we ought to take a few moments to evaluate while we’re talking about. We would normally say that the moral precepts of God are expressions of the divine attributes. And one would have to ask oneself “Does a hierarchy of moral laws, does that imply a hierarchy of the attributes of God?” That is, is God’s truthfulness lower than God’s mercy and if mercy is an attribute of God apparently it must be a higher attribute than truth telling.

So behind graded absolutism stands some sort of grading of the attributes of God which define the essence of God. I personally find that problematic. For me at least as well as for many other theologians, when we talk about the attributes of God we don’t think of them as isolated separate things. We would argue that
every attribute is revealed in each single one. It isn’t as if mercy is a single attribute that reveals only a part of God, it reveals the whole of God under the attribute of mercy. The whole of God is revealed under the attribute of faithfulness or truth and therefore to go to graded structures in the attributes of God does not seem to fit the biblical revelation and/or the theological content of the attributes of God.

Secondly, I would say to you that this kind of viewpoint is built upon some sort of Semi-Pelagian anthropology. Dr. Geisler argues that God never holds anyone accountable for the unavoidable. In a moral conflict you are caught in the unavoidable. The unavoidable, God will never hold you accountable for it, and therefore to say that when you face a moral conflict and you’ve done your best you are still held accountable for the violation of the lower norm will not fit the biblical revelation because being held accountable is based upon the ability to choose to do it or not to do it. And if one has no ability to choose and therefore one has to face the unavoidable then God will not hold him accountable.

That’s a very interesting notion. I wonder how that squares with the fact that persons are conceived in sin with the whole concept that because we are born in sin we will commit acts of sin and that our nature is such that we are born in rebellion against God. We are not free to choose to please God, we are depraved, unable to do anything to please God and it takes a supernatural act of God’s grace through regeneration to change our inner disposition so that we can do anything that God will view as righteous. In point of fact the whole doctrine of biblical substitution is based upon the fact that persons are born in sin and if it wasn’t for the righteousness which Christ achieved, that could be imputed to them, they would be helpless. They would be under judgment unable to do anything to please God, and if they repent and God graciously acts on their behalf and imputes Christ’s righteousness to them then they have the possibility of having a new heart and doing that which is acceptable to God.

I don’t think the Bible teaches a viewpoint that says, what is unavoidable cannot be put to someone’s account. I certainly would say that Judas’ betrayal of Jesus Christ was unavoidable. But it does appear to be something that Judas is held capable for. It does appear to me that Acts 2 and Acts 4 teaches that the death of Jesus Christ was unavoidable. That is, it was a part of the determinant council and foreknowledge of God and the Jews delivered Him up by lawless Roman hands and put Him on the
tree. And although that event was unavoidable, and although it was a part of the eternal plan of God, those who perpetrated that event are held accountable and guilty for the slaying of God's Christ. So that aspect of anthropology as it comes into the system certainly causes one some pause before one would accept graded absolutism as the best approach to deal with moral conflicts.

The third thing that I would say about it is this. In graded absolutism, you have to come to some understanding that the word absolute doesn’t always mean absolute. It comes out like this; absolutes are absolute in their context, truth telling is absolute in its context, life saving is absolute in its context. When these contexts overlap then we only have one absolute and the other is no longer an absolute. Now I say to you that’s the fudge with words. That’s to talk about limited omniscience or to talk about partially pregnant, or things of that character. Either something is a moral absolute or it’s not.

What has been borrowed in graded absolutism is the understanding of an ethical system call contextualism. In contextualism you argue values and morality have meaning in their context and these context are discrete. And if you take a contextual base and you say that truth-telling is absolute in its context but when context overlap it is no longer absolute, then I say to you, you fudge with the word absolute. The interesting part of it is, is the whole question of graded absolutism tends to come down to things like this. Does the Bible give any kind of indication that any of God’s moral commands are only contextually absolute and therefore may not be operative? And in point of fact, does the Bible ever suggest that at particular times it might be our moral duty to violate one of these contextual absolutes in order to keep a higher contextual absolute and therefore would justify lying or would justify stealing, in order to perform what we would call the higher good of life saving? You see, if you grade these and you have them only absolute in their context, then indeed you no longer have a series of morally absolute commands that are to govern human conduct.

The fourth thing that I would reflect on in relationship to graded absolutism is that the real absolute that they have is one that you will never find in the Bible. Because graded absolutism has a rule governing rule. That is a rule that transcends all other rules, and it is higher than any of the other rules, because this rule controls or governs all the other rules. If we say that the Ten Commandments are still operative today and each one of them is absolute in their
context and you would obey them without exception all your life until these context overlap and you face a moral conflict.

Now when you face a moral conflict, there is an ultimate rule, you have to use. And that rule is this, you in the face of a moral conflict must determine which command and its context is higher than the other command and its context. Now that rule of applying criteria to determine which command is higher and which command is lower so that you can grade them is the rule that governs all the other rules and it is, if you will excuse me, the absolute absolute that is absolute in every circumstance.

Now wouldn’t you expect that if there was an absolute absolute that governed all other absolutes that there might be some hint of it in some of the propositions of scripture? That God might have said to us, now in terms of my moral commands to you there is one of them that takes precedence over all others? It seems to me that the precedence in summary comes in the simple statement, thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy hearts, strength, soul and mind. And, love thy neighbor as thyself. It doesn’t appear to me that there is any indication in Scripture that there is an absolute absolute that says when absolute context come into conflict apply this three-fold hierarchy, determine which command and its context is higher, you will be given an exemption from the lower command in order to keep the higher command. God will never hold you accountable for that which you cannot control or that which is unavoidable. And therefore you will be given an exemption from the lower command, and in point of fact your lie will not ever violate a divine command, because of the exemption given.

Now friends I would suggest to you, that if that’s the ultimate basis to resolve moral conflicts that there is great difficulty in finding even a hint of that within the framework of biblical revelation or in any theological reconstruction of that biblical revelation.

I would also like to reflect in general about graded absolutism and say to you that if you take that verse in Hebrews that says, He was tested in every point like we are and make that to be a one-to-one correspondence to every human test that you go far beyond the boundaries of what the writer of Hebrews implied. May I ask you, was Jesus ever tempted not to love His wife? Why you would say absolutely not, He wasn’t married. If I asked you, was Jesus ever tempted to provoke His children to wrath by being cruel and harsh in discipline? Obviously not because Jesus was not married and
He had no children. So clearly that verse does not imply a one-to-one correspondence between every possible temptation that we have and the temptations that Jesus faced. What it is saying is, Jesus as a sinless man felt the full intensity of temptation much more than we do. We tend to capitulate early. He held out and never capitulated. The pressure He underwent was probably more intense than ours, but it certainly does not mean to imply that He went through every single temptation that every man has been through since creation.

To me that kind of argument is to beg the question. Jesus was not tempted in a one-to-one correspondence, yes Jesus never once sinned. Jesus found the way within the framework of His life in the midst of the complexity of it always to be able to obey God in every circumstance. Oh, I hate to tell you this but this is the only time we were going to discuss moral conflicts in the content of this course. The discussion has been brief and I certainly have not committed myself to a position, although I have criticized graded hierarchicalism to some level. I certainly do not mean to imply that, that means I hold to ideal or ideal absolutism or I hold to a lesser evil position.

As I close the lecture, I would like to suggest to you that I am much closer to John Murray’s position than I am to be other two possessions. That I am rather confident that it should be possible in the time of moral conflict to come up with an alternative that will not leave us in the terrible position of having to violate one or the other of God’s laws. Now I know as soon as I say that, everyone if they had the opportunity to question me, would give me moral conflicts and say tell me the range of alternatives that were available to this person. And I will admit to you freely that I may not be able to do that. But I would also like to suggest to you that if God’s moral laws will habitually and regularly come into conflict that there must be something wrong with how God has established and set this up.

Well that’s a way to analyze the systems of ethics under general categories. And to spend a little bit of time with the last three categories which have been called options in Christian ethics only as it deals with moral conflict, I suggest to you that you would need to do a great deal of reading and be very careful and come to a reflective conclusion in that domain.