



AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Introduction

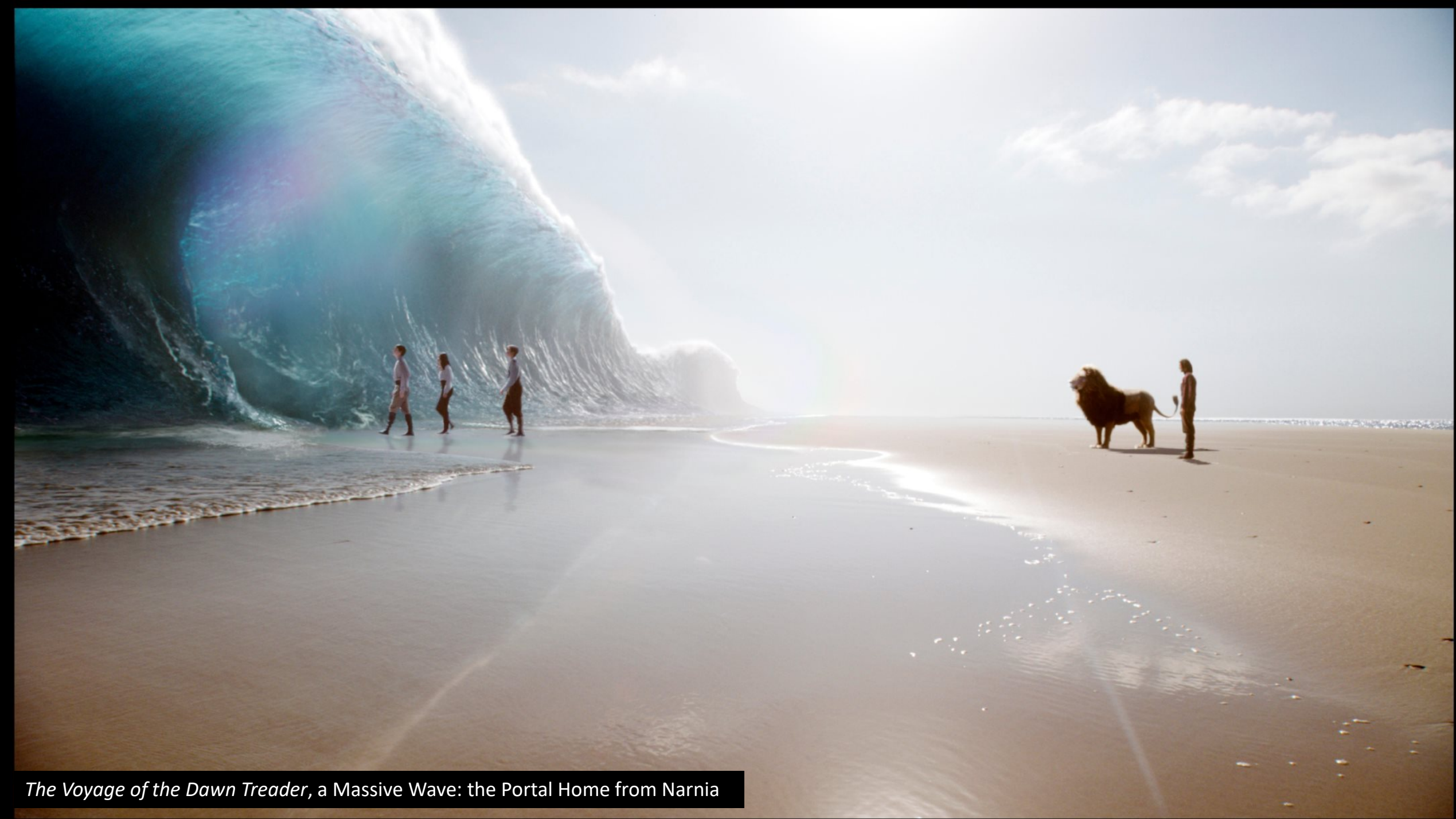
Welcome to this new series on *Christian Ethics*! Over Christmas and New Year's, I patiently waited for the Lord to impress upon my heart what He wanted me to teach during the winter and spring months of 2020. Over time, my initial considerations began to grow faint, while the subject of ethics began to take root in my heart and gain strength. I remembered that I had taught on ethics in the early years of the Harvesters Community, but was still surprised to learn, upon review, that the teaching only lasted four weeks in 2004 – sixteen years ago! To be sure, it was only a brief “taste.” My intentions now are for a much more robust and thorough presentation of this vast and complex subject for reasons which will be forthcoming in this lecture.

A Different Approach

As many of you know, my usual way of beginning each lecture is with a written introduction. Today, however, I will take a different path and tell a story – the story of my own journey through a specific portal of discovery into the immense, sublime, and transforming land of biblical ethics. Throughout history, God has used personal stories to open hearts to the gospel, to instruct, to correct, to encourage, and to exhort – both believers and unbelievers. Therefore, I have chosen this storytelling method to introduce our new series, and I invite you to listen and/or read along with me as we prepare to make this life-changing journey together. Upon hearing it, I do hope that you will willingly approach your own portal and freely enter into the land with me.



The Wardrobe: Lucy's Portal into Narnia



The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, a Massive Wave: the Portal Home from Narnia

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

Perhaps like many of you, my own journey in understanding the difference between right and wrong began in my family of origin and was reinforced by my pastors, Dr. Jim Baird and Rev. Bill Whitwer, the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ, and a long line of godly youth pastors. However, it should not be assumed that my behavior, motives, purpose in life, thoughts, and attitudes were *only* being shaped by these early influences. As I was developing in my moral sensibilities from childhood through adolescence, there is no doubt that school teachers, Sunday school teachers, coaches, books, television, music, friends, and the somewhat unique culture embodied in Gadsden, Alabama were also influencing the way I thought and acted.

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

Throughout my four years in college, I was confronted with ideas and behaviors which were outside the boundaries of the accepted norms that had been consistently taught and modeled to me. Walking across the campus one day, I remember smelling pot for the very first time. On the first day in my psychology class, my professor told me and the other freshmen in his large lecture hall that it was his mission to remove any vestiges of religion from our lives (some years later, he committed suicide). My English lit professor required us to read *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by Jonathan Edwards, after which he summarily dismissed both the sermon and Edwards as illustrations of antiquated religious figures and sentiments in colonial America.

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

The most serious destabilization of my thoughts on Christianity occurred during my senior year in *The History of Philosophy* classes I took. Taught by a double-PhD (in religion & philosophy) and committed atheist, I was bruised and shaken, but not knocked out. He had done his best to dissuade his young students from belief in God, but the Lord held me by His grace.

It was not until my final year in seminary four years later that I was *formally* introduced to the subject of ethics. On the first day of class, our professor distributed a 36-page syllabus entitled *Christian Ethics*, which included the course design, assignments, final exam questions, lecture outlines, auxiliary aids, and a supplementary bibliography (21 pages). After reviewing the syllabus, I somehow knew that I was about to enter a new world of thought which would be life-changing.

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

New and unfamiliar concepts, language, and authors were introduced to me in lightening fashion: metaethics, adiaphora, situationalism, tragic moral choice, social ethics, the goal and motive of ethics, the unity and confirmation of the Law, etc. A few of the 57 final exam questions we were given to study were as follows:

- Critique one of the following schools of ethics: utilitarianism, idealism, intuitionism, pragmatism, or existentialism.
- Briefly describe your metaethics and give a complete moral syllogism for the following judgment: “I ought to pay my library fines on this book.”

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

- Briefly define ten of the following: ethical dualism, ethical monism, ethical phenomenalism, naturalism, theological positivism, personalism, hedonism, intuitionism, utilitarianism, pragmatism, idealism, altruism, egoism, relativism, existentialism, self-realization.
- Give Scriptural counsel for someone who says, “I know what the Bible says, and I know the facts of the situation, but I still do not know what to do.”
- How has Paul’s statement that we are “not under law” been abused? How should it be understood and applied?
- Why can it be said that every sin is a transgression of all the commandments?

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

- Compare and contrast how Kline, Murray, and Rushdoony would reply to Rahab's lie.
- Are Christians obligated to observe the Sabbath today? Discuss the dispute on this question and give Scriptural answers.
- Is abortion ever justifiable? Why or why not?
- Write a brief essay on the issue of political revolution from a Christian viewpoint.
- Discuss the sexual feelings, attitudes, and behavior appropriate to the unmarried Christian.
- What economic system (if any) does the law of God require?

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

Without any previous preparation or education in ethics, I had been thrown into the deep end of the pool. Three times a week, I was being introduced to brand new ideas and ethical language which might as well have been cuneiform or hieroglyphics. Nevertheless, I knew I only had one option: to study two hours for each hour of class (required) in order to stay afloat and not get behind. By May 18, 1976 - my final class - I knew I had done more than *taken* a seminary course. My mind and my heart had been shaped by the mind of a brilliant thinker, and my entire theological education, along with private mentoring, had saved me from the irrationalism of the secular world. For the first time, I could see through the bankrupt philosophical and ethical systems of those who truly believe and promote the idea that God does not exist.

My Personal Journey in Understanding Ethics

Over the past 40+ years, I have continued in my studies of ethics, reading not only the works of Christian scholars like Francis Schaeffer, Rousas J. Rushdoony, John Murray, John Frame, Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Carl F.H. Henry, Wayne Grudem, and Cornelius van Til, but also the works of secular moral philosophers like Sam Harris, John Stuart Mill, John-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, David Hume, and James Stalker. Even so, it should be told that after writing a book of almost 1,000 pages on *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Dr. John Frame made it clear that he had tried to describe Christian ethics - but “without any pretense of comprehensiveness.” My 36-page ethics syllabus had already prepared me for the vastness of the subject.

The Purpose of Sharing My Journey

After reviewing this portion of my story, I wondered what impact it would have upon you. There was no doubt in my mind that it would cause you to think about your own moral upbringing and the sources of your understanding of right and wrong. I thought it would also prompt you to search your minds for any memories related to the study of ethics - the courses you may have taken or the books you have read. Then, I considered what my ethics professor's syllabus and exam questions may have triggered in your minds and hearts. Did it cause you to fear that the study of ethics may be too daunting and intimidating? And, finally, I optimistically thought that if you were taught the same ethical model I was taught, your life could be transformed.

Why Study Ethics?

John Frame's answer to this question is as follows:

1. "Servants of Jesus are people who have his commandments and keep them...If we are to be devoted to good works, we must know what works are good and what ones are bad. So we need to study ethics."
2. "One purpose of Scripture itself is to promote ethical behavior....Note the ethical focus of II Tim. 3:16-17."
3. "In one sense, everything in the Bible is ethical....All the content of Scripture ought to be believed and acted upon."
4. "The study of ethics is enormously important for our witness to the world....Discussions of ethical questions open a wide door for Christian witness."

Moral Language

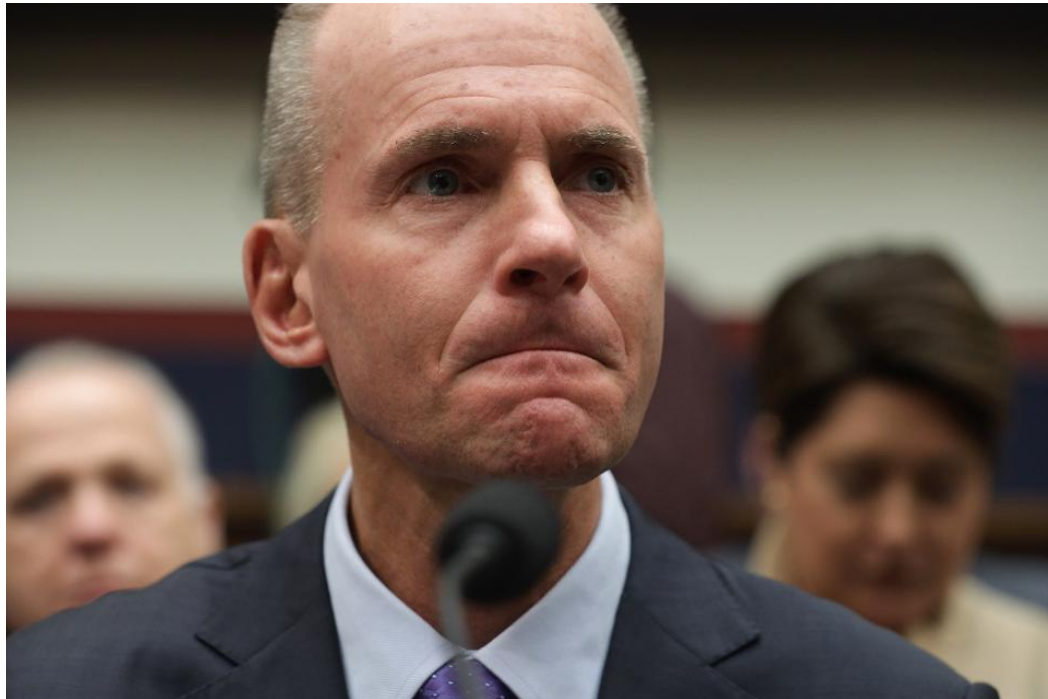


Rep. Tulsi Gabbard

“We need to get out of Iraq and Syria now. That is the only way that we’re going to prevent ourselves from being dragged into this quagmire, deeper and deeper into a war with Iran.”

- Facebook Post, January 3, 2020

Is This Ethically Right?



Dennis Muilenburg

“Despite the tragedies (two plane crashes that killed over 300 passengers), Muilenburg may leave Boeing with \$58.5 million in cash and stock as part of his severance package, according to CBS News.”

- *Forbes*, December 24, 2019

Would You Support Virginia's Gun Bill?



“(State Sen. Dick) Saslaw’s bill – SB 16 - provides that ‘It is unlawful for any person to import, sell, manufacture, purchase, possess or transport an assault firearm’ and makes such actions a Class 6 felony. (In Virginia, Class 6 felonies are punishable by imprisonment for between one and five years).”

- *The American Spectator*, Dec. 2, 2019

The Journey Before Us



Dr. John M. Frame

As we begin our study, it would be useful to begin with John Frame's description of Christian ethics:

“Living under God’s law, in God’s world, in the presence of God himself.”