

As Long As it Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else – A Biblical Critique of Modern Ethics

Rick Wade considers a common idea behind the ethical thinking of many people. He identifies the inconsistencies in this approach and compares it to a biblically informed ethical system. As Christians, we should bring a Christ centered perspective to our ethical decisions.

What ethical principle guides our society these days? Clearly the Bible isn't the norm. What is?

As I see it, people generally don't try to justify their actions. We want to do something, so we do it. And if we're criticized by someone else, how do we respond? The one justification I hear over and over again is, "I can do whatever I want, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else."

Do a quick search on the Internet using the phrase "hurt anyone else." Here's a blog by a motorcycle rider who says it's no one else's business whether he wears a helmet because it doesn't hurt anyone else.[\[1\]](#) Here's another one where the topic is some kind of staph infection that seems to be spreading among gay men. The writer says he or she's a "big gay rights supporter and definitely [believes] that a person should be true to their own sexuality (as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else)." The writer goes on to raise a question about whether certain sexual activity is okay from a public health perspective.[\[2\]](#) Now there's a dilemma.

"As long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." On the surface, that looks like a pretty good rule. I can think of things we'd all agree are morally acceptable that we should avoid if others could be hurt. There's nothing wrong with swinging a baseball bat around, unless you're in a roomful of people. In Scripture

we're admonished to give up our freedoms if necessary to save the conscience of weaker believers (1 Corinthians 8).

Problems with the Rule

As a fundamental rule of life, "as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else" is a pretty skimpy ethical principle. There are several problems with it.

First, if there are no concrete ethical principles that apply across the board, how do we measure hurt? Some things are obvious. Swinging a bat in a roomful of people will have immediate and obvious negative consequences. But physical hurt isn't the only kind. We need to know what constitutes "hurt" in order to apply the "as long as" principle. So, one question to ask a person who touts this approach to life is, How do you decide whether something is hurtful or not? Without concrete ethical norms, the "as long as" rule is empty.

Second, this rule faces a problem similar to one faced by utilitarian ethics. *Utilitarianism* seeks to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But how can a person predict the outcome of an action? It's difficult to work out a greatest good calculus. The "as long as" rule doesn't even go as far as utilitarianism. The latter at least seeks the good of others (in principle, anyway). The former only seeks to avoid harming them. So the question becomes, How can you predict who will be hurt or how?

Here's another thought. Consider the influence others have had on *you*, including those who did what they wanted "as long as it didn't hurt someone else." What about the young man who was just enjoying his high school prom night with a little partying and wrecked his car, killing someone's daughter? Or how about the couple who had a sexual relationship apart from the responsibilities of marriage, and then parted over jealousy or a changed mind and carried the scars of that relationship into others? Maybe you've had to deal with the

ramifications of such experiences, yours or your spouse's. Maybe you've had to try to learn on your own how to behave like a grownup because your dad never buckled down in the serious business of life but just had fun, forgetting that he was teaching you by word and example how to live.

When hearing this rule espoused, I can't help wondering how many people even *try* to figure out the effects of their actions on others. I mean, we might give a moment's thought to whether something will hurt anyone in the immediate setting or within a short period of time. But do we think beyond the immediate? How do our actions as young people affect our children not yet born? Or what does it mean for parents if their teenage daughter engages in a hard night of partying and winds up in a coma because of what she's imbibed? Such things do happen, you know?

One more objection before giving a thumbnail sketch of biblical teaching on the matter. When a person speaks of not hurting others, what about that person him- or herself? Is it acceptable to hurt ourselves as long as we don't hurt others? I'm not talking about taking measurable risks that we are confident we can handle. I'm talking about the array of things people do and justify with the "as long as" principle: doing drugs, engaging in "safe" sex apart from marital commitment, cheating on taxes, spending years following childish dreams without giving serious thought to the future, even living a very shrunken life.

That last one is important to note because ethics isn't just a set of rules given to prevent harm; it also has to do with guiding us into fulfilled lives. The "as long as" rule can justify a seriously diminished life. Most of us have encountered people (maybe our own teenagers!) who could be doing so much better in life than they are, and when challenged they respond, "What does it matter? I'm not hurting anybody else." Maybe not, but they're sure hurting themselves.

A Biblical Ethic

What does the Bible say about these things? Scripture calls us to put others ahead of ourselves. We aren't to cause others harm. More than that, we're to seek others' good. We're given the ultimate example of sacrifice in Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing" for our benefit ([Philippians 2:6-8](#)). We're told to give up things we can legitimately enjoy if they hurt other people ([1 Corinthians 8](#)).

Furthermore, we're given real ethical content: Don't steal. Don't murder. Don't take someone else's wife. Do good to others. Feed the hungry. Practice justice grounded in the righteousness of God.

Then there's the matter of our own lives. Is the "as long as" principle sufficient to encourage us to develop and use the abilities God has given us? A couch potato might truly not be hurting anyone else, but he's living a small life. Just seeking to do good to others can be a motivation to get up and get busy and do ourselves some good as a result.

The "as long as" rule pushes personal liberty almost to the limit. It puts me at the center of the world. I can do whatever I want, and furthermore, you'd better not do anything that I find hurtful. I stated the rule in the first person in the opening paragraph ("I can do whatever I want") deliberately. For some reason we don't apply it as liberally to others as we do to ourselves!

Without ethical content, however, it gives no direction at all. It really has no place in the Christian life. Our lives are to be governed by an ethics grounded in the nature and will of God which takes into account a biblical view of human nature, a biblical call to protect others and seek their good, and the divine project of redemption that seeks to save and

build people up in the image of Christ, including ourselves.

This vision of life makes the “as long as” rule look rather paltry, doesn’t it? We can do better.

Notes

1. TheLedger.com, (see: tinyurl.com/34m9mf).
2. MyFolsom.com (see: tinyurl.com/2jp32o).

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See Also:

[“How Should I Respond to ‘It’s All Right to do Anything as Long as It Doesn’t Hurt Anybody’?”](#)

India’s Missing Girls and the Right to Choose

Rusty Wright and Meg Korpi reveal that female infanticide and feticide in India’s patriarchal culture stir passions for equality and fairness but raise troubling questions. Does favoring a woman’s right to choose logically imply that one supports her right to terminate a fetus simply because it is female?

Last summer, a farmer in southern India discovered a tiny human hand poking from the ground. A two-day-old baby girl had been buried alive. The reason? Much of Indian culture favors

males over females, sometimes brutally so. The girl's grandfather confessed to attempting murder because his family already had too many females; keeping this one would be too costly.

This wasn't an isolated incident on the subcontinent according to award-winning filmmaker Ashok Prasad. Prasad spoke recently at Stanford University at the U.S. premiere of his BBC documentary "India's Missing Girls." Anti-female bias affects Indians rich and poor. Males can perpetuate the family name, bring wealth, and care for elderly parents. A female's family typically must pay a huge dowry when she weds, often depleting family resources. A popular Hindi aphorism: "Having a girl is to plant a seed in someone else's garden."[{1}](#)

Female Infanticide and Feticide

Against odds, this baby survived, but social and financial pressures bring alarming rates of female infanticide and feticide (termination of a fetus). UN figures estimate 750,000 Indian girls are aborted every year.[{2}](#) Demographic studies reveal dramatically growing gender disparity since the 1980's[{3}](#); in some regions only 80 baby girls survive for every 100 boys.[{4}](#) Many men cannot find wives.

Financial repercussions are typically cited as the reason for discarding daughters, but the decision is often an economic choice rather than necessity. Greater gender disparity occurs in wealthier states.[{5}](#) These families can better afford the sex determination tests and sex-selective abortions that, according to a report published by the UN Population Fund, are the main contributors to the decreasing proportion of female children.[{6}](#)

Adding to the offensiveness of sex-selective abortion: the fetus must be well-formed (15-18 weeks) before the sex can be detected using ultrasound-the common sex-determination technology. "India's Missing Girls" includes brief, grisly

footage of terminated female fetuses being lifted from a well belonging to a clinic that performed sex-selective abortions. After the discovery, outraged women's groups protested in the streets; several such clinics were closed down.

The heartening side of the documentary is Sandhya Reddy, who runs a children's home, cares for abandoned kids, and tries to persuade mothers to keep their daughters or girl fetuses. This angel of mercy brings love, care and opportunity to society's young rejects.

"India's Missing Girl's" poignantly depicts where devaluing women can lead. The Stanford screening's sponsors included feminist and women's organizations, but feminists and nonfeminists, liberals and conservatives alike will be moved. An [abbreviated 29-minute version](#) on [YouTube](#) is worth watching, even if only the first 10-minute segment.[\[7\]](#)

Troubling Questions

To Western sensibilities, killing babies and terminating fetuses solely because of gender is abhorrent. Yet no Hitler masterminds this mass extermination of females. It results from hundreds of thousands of personal decisions.

As the U.S. recognizes 35 years of *Roe v. Wade*, feticide's increasing contribution to India's missing girls raises a disturbing dilemma: Doesn't favoring a woman's right to free reproductive choice logically require supporting her right to terminate a fetus simply because it is female?

Important worldview questions emerge. Opposing female feticide seems to ascribe some sort of value to the female fetus. Is this value inherent because the fetus is female? If so, wouldn't equality require that we ascribe similar value to the male fetus because it is male?

Or is the fetus's value utilitarian, e.g., to ensure female influence in society or sufficient brides? Or is it merely

economic-negative for Indian females, positive for males?

An enduring view of the fetus's value appears in Psalm 139. King David's worldview recognizes awe-inspiring biological intricacy fashioned by the Divine: You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!{8}

Inherently valuable? Socially useful? Economically consequential? Wonderfully complex? The troubling quandary still haunts: Can opposing female feticide be reconciled with supporting reproductive choice? The question demands a logically consistent answer from every thinking person.

Notes

1. Raekha Prasad and Randeep Ramesh, "India's missing girls," Guardian Unlimited, February 28, 2007, guardian.co.uk/india/story/0,,2022983,00.html; accessed January 18, 2008
2. Ashok Prasad, "Harsh reality of India's unwanted girls," BBC News, 22 October 2007, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/7050657.stm; accessed January 18, 2008.
3. Christophe Z. Guilmoto, "Characteristics of sex-ratio imbalance in India, and future scenarios," Report presented at the 4th Asia Pacific Conference on Reproductive Health and Rights, Hyderabad, India, October 29-31, 2007. Published by the United Nations Population Fund www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/studies/india.pdf; downloaded January 25, 2008.
4. Prasad and Ramesh, loc. cit.
5. Using India's 2001 census data for each state (www.censusindia.gov.in), we found strong negative correlations (-0.5 to -0.7) between various indicators of wealth and female-to-male sex ratios for children under 6.
6. Guilmoto, loc. cit.
7. www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf32d735VgE; accessed January 18,

2008.

8. [Psalm 139:13-14 NLT](#).

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World Hunger

Kerby Anderson helps us consider the fundamental reasons behind the prevalence of hunger in our world today. He points out our responsibility as Christians to make our resources available to help those caught in this crises. He tells us we need to be praying and working to end world hunger.

Frequently we see pictures of starving children and are overwhelmed by the awesome task of feeding the world's hungry. Why, we wonder, is there so much hunger in the world today? The answer can be broken down into three categories: poverty, population, and priorities.

Poverty, Population, and Priorities

The first reason for hunger is poverty. The poor are hungry, and the hungry are usually poor. In First World countries, we talk about our quality of life or our standard of living. But in Third World countries, the focus shifts to the mere sustaining of life. A major problem in Third World countries is capital investment. There is very little money that can be spent on agricultural development or even basics like seed and farm tools.

A second reason for hunger is population. Nearly every country has experienced a growth in population, but the greatest impact has been on the world's poorest countries because they

have been experiencing exponential growth in their population.

Notice how exponential population growth shortens our response time to crises. This planet did not reach a population of 1 billion until about the turn of the century. It took the world thousands of years to reach a population level of 1 billion. By 1950, the world's population grew to 2 billion. So the population doubled in just 50 years. By 1975, we had 4 billion people, so the doubling time decreased to just 25 years. Many experts estimate that we will have 6 to 8 billion people by the end of this century.

This exponential growth puts an enormous strain on our ability to provide resources and services to a starving world. Imagine if your own city or town had its population double every 20 to 25 years. That would mean you would have to double the number of houses, double the number of grocery stores, double the number of roads, and double the number of sewage-treatment plants.

Such growth would be a significant strain on the budget and resources of a First World country. Imagine the strain this would put on a Third World country. So the problem of world hunger is exacerbated by population growth.

A third reason for world hunger is priorities. Those of us who live in an industrialized society place a high priority on comfort and convenience. Our standard of living places a significant strain on the world economy.

In the First World countries, we only have a 1 percent growth rate. But that 1 percent growth rate affects the planet eight times as much as the 23 percent growth rate of the lesser-developed countries. The reason for this is that we use a lot more resources to maintain our standard of living. Currently it costs 30 times as much in terms of energy and resources to feed a North American as it does to feed a Pakistani.

Certainly this is something Christians must consider in terms

of their own economic lifestyle. At a time when people are not getting enough to eat, we are living a lifestyle far beyond what many could even imagine.

We have a great challenge before us. We must not only consider what we can do to feed the hungry, but we must also consider what we should do to limit our indulgent lifestyle.

Exploitation

I would next like to focus on some of the most publicized causes of world hunger. The first is exploitation. There is a tremendous amount of exploitation in the world, which has led to the problem of hunger. Christians should not be surprised. Many Old Testament verses in the books of Proverbs, Amos, and Micah speak of poverty that results from exploitation and fraud.

Many countries were exploited by colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. But while this is true, let me also hasten to add that liberals have perhaps made too much of the colonial connection.

P. T. Bauer, in his book *Dissent on Development*, shows that many of these countries that had some contact with the Western world actually did better economically than those countries that did not have any contact at all. Hong Kong and India, which were ruled by colonial powers, did better economically than countries in the deepest part of Africa that had little contact with Western economies.

When these countries gained independence, they did not have to start from scratch. The colonial powers left behind roads, schools, and hospitals, all of which provided an infrastructure to build upon.

But another aspect of exploitation that is often ignored is not the colonial connection but the Marxist connection. Countries such as Ethiopia with authoritarian Marxist

governments bring great suffering on their populations because of government policies that prevent food and compassionate aid from reaching their people.

Misfortune and Persecution

A second cause of hunger is misfortune and persecution. Again this should come as no surprise to Christians. In the book of Job we have an example of poverty that comes through misfortune. In other places we see how poverty results from persecution. And sometimes poverty comes because of God's judgment on a people who disobey Him.

Because we live in a fallen world, we must not be surprised when misfortune strikes. During the last two decades, for example, we have had fairly stable weather patterns. Now that the weather has become more erratic, we wonder what is going wrong. Although many doomsayers want to blame these changes on the much-publicized greenhouse effect, most of these climatic fluctuations are typical. We have been lulled into thinking that weather is predictable and must remind ourselves that the earth still "groans in travail" because we live in a fallen world. Hurricanes, monsoons, and droughts are going to exacerbate our problems with world hunger.

As we look at these problems, we can see that the problem of world hunger is going to increase rather than decrease. As our weather continues to be erratic and as terrorism and persecution intensify around the world, problems with hunger will intensify.

We are going to have to find ways to help the people and countries that are suffering. Part of the solution may be for our government to provide help through foreign aid. But another important and often neglected part of the solution is for Christian organizations to provide food and resources to the needy. The problem of world hunger is massive, and all of us must do what we can to solve the problem.

Governmental Control

Along with these well-known causes of hunger are a few less-publicized, more obscure causes. One of these causes is governmental control. Hunger and poverty are often due to the very structure of governments. This is important to realize when we begin to talk about cures for world hunger, because we as a country are often limited in what we can do to lessen hunger in a foreign nation.

The statement by Jesus that the poor will always be with us takes on a new meaning when we realize how intractable many problems like world hunger are. Lack of food and unpredictable weather patterns aren't the sole causes of hunger. Many times governmental control makes hunger worse.

Even a cursory look at the world market shows that those countries that provide the greatest economic freedom also have the greatest amount of economic success. Hong Kong, for example, is a country that has received no foreign aid. But because it has a relatively free market, it enjoys one of the highest standards of living of any country in Asia.

Economic freedom allows personal incentive and pushes the economic engine of development. We can see this in the example of the former Soviet Union. In addition to the large governmental plots of agricultural land, smaller plots were allocated to the individual farmer. It is estimated that nearly 25 percent of all the Soviet agricultural produce came from these small, private plots of land. Soviet production on small plots of land demonstrates the power of incentive created by economic freedom. If a government focuses all its time and attention on the commonality of property, it will lead its country down the path towards poverty and hunger.

Indifference

Another cause of hunger is indifference. Individuals and their

governments should be more concerned about world hunger than they are now. The affluence of North America often keeps us from being concerned about those who do not have enough to eat. Although the United States has set the standard for many other nations in its compassionate giving, still more could be done.

Particularly troubling is the lack of compassion of Third World countries for their neighbors. The OPEC countries, for example, have vast financial resources, which they are unwilling to share with countries in the region not blessed with such geological resources. They need to show compassion to their neighboring countries.

The Culture of Poverty

A third cause of hunger is the culture of poverty. Proverbs 10:15 says, "The ruin of the poor is their poverty." The reason for poverty is often the prior existence of poverty. Poverty breeds more poverty, and more poverty breeds more hunger.

Those people who come from an impoverished situation do not have the means by which to better themselves. They are not getting the necessary calories and nutrition, so they are caught in the web of poverty. Moreover, they are being raised in a culture of poverty that perpetuates dependence and prevents advancement.

This is where the gospel can have an impact. Poverty and hunger are not just economic problems. There is a strong psychological and spiritual component to poverty. A person who is born again changes his worldview, and this is an important aspect of dealing with the problem of hunger.

Curing World Hunger

When we talk about solutions to world hunger we should realize

that there are a number of unbiblical solutions. One of the most incredible is the "lifeboat ethic," which proposes the use of the principle known as *triage*.

The Lifeboat Ethic

This idea was popularized by Dr. Garrett Hardin at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He uses the metaphor of the lifeboat to explain how rich nations are surrounded by poor ones who want to get into the lifeboat. He says, at some point, we have to push them back into the water to prevent us all from sinking.

He further argues that the problem will become worse because many of these countries will not control their populations. Thus, he says, it is inevitable that these people will eventually starve. He believes that feeding them will only prolong the suffering. Hardin therefore proposes we use the principle of triage. This concept as it is used in military medicine attempts to classify war or disaster victims according to the severity of their wounds in order to maximize the number of survivors. As incoming wounded arrive, they are placed in one of three groups. The first group has superficial wounds and can be treated later. The second group has more substantial wounds and must be treated immediately. And the members of the third group have such massive wounds that they are simply set aside and allowed to die.

Proponents of this lifeboat ethic suggest that we use the principle of triage and stop shipments of food to Third World nations facing starvation. After all, they argue, there is only so much room in the lifeboat or on "Spaceship Earth." We must push the rest of these people off the boat in order to save ourselves.

This idea certainly raises profound ethical questions. But the metaphor only makes sense if you accept the following three assumptions. The first assumption is that there is no

distinction between people and animals. The second assumption is that we are pushing the limits of the world's resources. The third assumption is that population growth is not being brought under control. However, all three of these assumptions are false. First, there is a distinction between people and animals. Humans have dignity because they are created in the image of God and are therefore distinct from animals. Yet we live in a world where evolutionists blur this distinction between humans and animals.

The second assumption is also questionable. We do live in a fallen world, and there are some limits to growth. But an even greater production of resources is possible, and numerous conservation techniques can increase production.

The third assumption, that population growth is not being brought under control, is also in doubt. There is evidence that many countries are serious about controlling their population explosion. In fact, many nations are experiencing a decline in their birth rates and will eventually have declining populations.

What we have to recognize is that there are many people who are proposing unbiblical solutions. And we as Christians have a responsibility to make sure these propositions do not become law.

The Christian Ethic

Often I find that Christians look at the problem of world hunger and become overwhelmed. They ask, What can we do? After all, many solutions to world hunger come from governmental agencies and large organizations.

We need to recognize that governmental agencies and even private organizations are only part of the solution and often are not as effective as Christian organizations and missionaries. In Marxist countries like Ethiopia, the United

States has limited diplomatic relationships. Moreover, the government has used some of the incoming aid as a weapon against their enemies. Indigenous programs through missionary organizations can sometimes be more effective since they do not have to go through as many diplomatic channels. Christians should realize there are things we can do, and we can learn about these from Scripture. The first obvious thing we can do is to give. The Bible talks about the compassionate distribution of food and other resources in passages such as 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 9. The New Testament church gave to other Christians who were in need.

One way a church can foster an attitude of compassion is to emphasize our responsibility to the hungry. One program called "Skip a Lunch and Feed a Bunch" encourages Christians to save the money they would have used to buy lunch and place it in a container for those who are hungry.

Some agencies have programs for adopting a child in another country and providing for his or her food and educational expenses. You can write letters to the child and have a personal involvement in this often abstract problem of world hunger.

Another solution to world hunger is missionary work. As missionaries go into various cultures, they are able to change attitudes and values that perpetuate the cycle of hunger and poverty. They can teach people how to become more independent economically and how to develop the resources available to them. In the famine in Ethiopia, many Christian relief organizations provided both food and resources. Unfortunately, their efforts were hampered by inadequate ports and a primitive transportation network. Many of the nation's trucks were being used to fight a civil war, and others were crippled by a lack of spare parts. So the relief organizations began to airlift food in order to feed those starving in remote areas of the country.

Missionary outreach has also had an impact by preaching the gospel. As I mentioned previously, spiritual conversion changes a person's worldview and can break the culture of poverty. Many of the problems of poverty and hunger are not economic but psychological and spiritual. These include such things as poor training or wrongful attitudes.

Preaching the gospel can change not only individuals but a culture. Just think of the impact the Hindu worldview has on countries like India. False religious beliefs keep the Indians from utilizing beef, an important source of protein. Other ideas such as the concept of *karma* keep Indians from meeting the needs of the underclass. Conversion to Christianity can change not only individual lives but a culture that rests on a false foundation. World hunger is certainly a major problem. As Christians we need to be praying and working to provide solutions to the awesome problem of feeding the world.

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