

# 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](http://tinyurl.com/34m9mf)).
2. MyFolsom.com (see: [tinyurl.com/2jp32o](http://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’?”](#)

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# Animal House Revisited: Fraternity Fosters Faith

College fraternities don’t always have the best reputations. Wild parties, hazing, elitism, substance abuse, gang rapes and more help perpetuate the Animal House image that the film of the same name portrayed. Parents – and many students – might wonder why any sane person ever would want to join.

Though the weaknesses of university Greek-letter societies are often what grab headlines, numerous national fraternities and sororities try hard to change both their image and substance. Believe it or not, many were founded to promote character

development and strong cultural values and are seeking to return to their roots.

For example, my own fraternity, Lambda Chi Alpha, has a vision "...to prepare and encourage collegiate men of good character, high ethics, and noble ideals to contribute positively to the world in which they live." Lambda Chi's annual North American Food Drive has raised over 10.5 million pounds of food for the needy since 1993.

The liability crisis is one factor motivating "Greeks" to focus on character. In today's litigious society, a tragic injury or death can prompt lawsuits that could put them out of business. Moderating local behavior helps perpetuate national survival.

But there is more going on here than mere survival. Often top leaders of national Greek organizations are deeply committed citizens who seek to live by and promote the principles their groups espouse.

Many Greek organizations were founded on biblical or quasi-biblical principles. Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) is one of the more prominent fraternities with over 240 active and inactive chapters and over 6,000 undergraduate members. ATO chief executive officer Wynn Smiley told me of his group's convictions.

It seems that ATO was founded in 1865 by a 19-year-old former Confederate soldier who wanted to promote brotherly love as a means of helping to reconcile North and South after the U.S. Civil War. The organization that young Otis Allan Glazebrook founded was not religious but sought to foster reconciliation and brotherhood based on the self-sacrifice and unconditional love demonstrated by Jesus.

Smiley and his colleagues emphasize these roots in their recruitment and educational development. "Jesus made the most radical statements on love," notes Smiley. An example: "You

have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

Allen Wilson is ATO's Spiritual Leadership Consultant. Most chapters have chaplains and Wilson travels to help encourage spiritual development. ATO even has a devotional book with inspirational articles by alumni and others on practical themes like character, trust, humility, truth, servant leadership and persevering through disappointment.

Smiley readily admits that not every member or chapter exemplifies such values. But he points out that hidden personal hurts – from family illness to depression – plus students' concerns for their own future, ethical dilemmas and faith raise questions that "brothers practicing brotherly love should help each other explore." He says that "ATO is committed to talking about issues of faith" and to providing "a loving, trusting environment for brothers to explore, discuss, argue and perhaps even on occasion resolve questions."

He is onto something significant here. Animal House, meet the competition.