

Notes on  
**"The Form and Function of Moral Norms,"**  
 In Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee,  
*Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, 2003) 98-124.

Stassen and Gushee propose that all Christians (and all human beings) organize and communicate their moral convictions (moral norms) at four different levels: the particular and immediate judgment level, the rules level, the principles level, and the basic-conviction level. Sorting out and differentiating these four levels will help us apply and appreciate the Sermon on the Mount.

<b>Four Levels of Moral Norms</b>	
<p><b>1. Particular/immediate judgment level</b></p> <p>In "character ethics" this would be the "<u>deeds level</u>."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A moral evaluation in a particular and immediate situation.</li> <li>- Judgments are about actions (conduct) and people (character)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) It applies to one particular case</li> <li>(b) No reasons are given for the judgment</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Examples: "That's wrong." "She is a good person." When Jesus called Herod, "That fox" (Lk. 13:32).</li> <li>- If we examine a judgment, we can often:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Discover the rule, principle or basic conviction from which the judgment is derived.</li> <li>(b) Apply a particular and immediate judgment to other similar situations by way of analogy.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Rules level</b></p> <p>In "character ethics" this would be the "<u>normative practice level</u>."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rules tell us directly and concretely what to do or not to do</li> <li>- Rules apply not just to one immediate case, but to all similar cases.</li> <li>- Examples: "Go the second mile." "Do not kill." "Drive 55 miles per hour."</li> <li>- Rules are different from general principles. Rules are derived from principles; principles support rules.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Principle: "Love your enemy" doesn't tell us specifically how to love our enemy.</li> <li>(b) Rule: "Go the second mile" is one concrete expression of the principle "love your enemy."</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Principle level</b></p> <p>In "character ethics" this would be the "<u>embodied virtue level</u>."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principles provide the basis for rules—or criticism of them.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Principles are more general than rules; they are one level deeper than rules.</li> <li>(b) They do not tell us directly and concretely what to do.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- A principle supports the rule; a rule spells out a direct application of the general principle.</li> </ul>

<b>Four Levels of Moral Norms</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Example: "Love your enemies" is a general principle. "Go the extra mile" and "Pray for your enemy" are rules based on the principle of love.</li> <li>- Are there "absolute rules," rules without exceptions?                         <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Stassen and Gushee say, "No."</li> <li>(b) While there is a need for clear, firm and sturdy moral rules, the problem is if rules are there for reasons (principles), the reasons for which the rules exist sometimes can override the rules themselves.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- A "legalist" operates solely at the level of rules and detaches the rules from the underlying principles that are their reason for existence.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Basic-conviction level</b></p> <p>In "character ethics" this would be the "<u>narrative base</u>."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A basic conviction is the basis for our principles, rules, and judgments.</li> <li>- You cannot go deeper than basic convictions.</li> <li>- For Christians, the basic-conviction level is about the character, activity, and will of God, and about the nature of human beings.</li> <li>- Examples: Jesus grounded his teaching in the character of God: "Be merciful, because God is merciful" (Lk. 3:36). The Ten Commandments are ground in God's grace (Exod. 20:2).</li> <li>- This level is concerned with our understanding of the God's Character, the Kingdom of God, the meaning of the Gospel, etc.</li> </ul>

### Character Ethics

Following Stassen and Gushee, the four levels of moral norms correspond to different levels within the framework of "character ethics" (also known as contextualism, narrative ethics, or virtue ethics). In this view, "rules and principles get their meaning from the various contexts in which they are understood" (Stassen & Gushee, 114).

There are various contexts can include certain institutions (e.g., MCUSA, Dallas Cowboys, or the Pentagon), certain communities (e.g., the City of Wichita, First Mennonite Church, or boy Scout Troop 38), certain games (e.g., chess, regatta, or basketball), or a particular worldview (e.g, naturalism, deism, Buddhism, Christianity, etc.). The context determines the rules and principles. Because we live in many different contexts, our rules and principles may conflict.

"Human beings are not isolated individual decision-makers but instead members of groups, communities and societies in which they are embedded and to which they tend to be quite loyal.... Christian ethics must and should be done in the context of our faith-communities, and our faith-communities must do Christian ethics in the context of the theological narrative found in scripture—in particular, the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ." (Stassen & Gushee, 114).

Three contexts are especially important:

1. Personal faith context: the "story of my life" from the perspective of Christian faith
2. Church context: the "story of our life together" in the church
3. Society context: the "story or stories" of our larger society

Stassen and Gushee write: "In contextualism and narrative ethics, as we interpret it:

- (a) What is ethical is ultimately defined and determined by basic theological convictions and narrative contexts [base-conviction or narrative base level].
- (b) Moral decision making [judgment or deeds level] is not just individual but helped by consultation and mutual admonition from the faith community.
- (c) Rules [normative practice level] and principles [embodied virtue level] find their place within the context of core theological beliefs" (Stassen & Gushee, 115)

The narrative base is the fundamental theological narrative found in Scripture (God's character demonstrated by God's creation and redemption within the broad narrative-history and individual narrative-accounts).

"Our four-level analysis tells us that the particular beliefs and loyalties generated by the theological-narrative context that serves as our ultimate basic conviction for Christian ethics need to be spelled out in rules and principles in order to give us clear guidance. Rules and principles make clear what we understand to be the implications of the gospel story and our life stories for concrete ethics." (Stassen & Gushee, 116-7)

"We want our rules and principles to be clearly *embodied* in narratives [i.e., actual lives lived, narrative accounts of our lives, narrative accounts of our church, and the narrative(s) of Scripture], church practices and faith-communities. Rules and principles are not suspended in midair; they get their meaning and have their context in the realistic, *embodied*, Hebraic narrative of both Testaments, and in their analogous function in a realistic, embodied way of living in our social context. And we want our narrative ethics to be concretely expressed, embodied, in principles, rules and concrete judgments about particular cases." (Stassen & Gushee, 117)

Levels of Moral Norms	Levels of Character Ethics
Particular/immediate judgment	Deeds = <u>Choices</u> and actions
Rules	Normative practice = <u>Community</u> norms for practices and behavior
Principles	Embodied virtue = <u>Character</u> , inner dispositions and habits of the heart
Basic-convictions	Narrative base = <u>Controlling</u> narrative, which we summarize as the Kingdom or Reign of God