

THE MODERN AUTODIDACT SYSTEM

Course Specification

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

A Foundation in Moral Theology and Applied Christian Ethics

Duration: 9-12 months (1-2 hours daily study)

Approach: Broad survey to specialized focus; Reformed perspective with charitable engagement

Primary Resources: Books, online lectures, supplementary media

Outcome: Foundational competence in Christian moral reasoning and contemporary ethical issues

Course Goals

Upon completing this course of self-directed study, you will be able to:

- Articulate the biblical foundations for Christian ethics from both Old and New Testaments
- Understand and evaluate major approaches to Christian ethics: deontological, virtue-based, covenantal, and kingdom ethics
- Engage thoughtfully with contested issues in applied ethics (bioethics, social justice, political theology)
- Trace the historical development of Christian moral thought from Augustine through contemporary voices
- Apply Christian ethical reasoning to personal, ecclesial, and public moral questions
- Engage charitably with opposing viewpoints while maintaining theological convictions

Phase 1: Foundations and Orientation

Duration: Weeks 1-8 | Steps 1-3 of the Modern Autodidact System

This phase establishes foundational knowledge through accessible introductory texts and structured online courses. The goal is to build a mental map of the discipline before engaging more demanding canonical works.

Step 1: Establish Focus and Motivation

Before beginning, clarify your reasons for studying Christian ethics. Consider how this discipline connects to your broader autodidact program and your vocational or ministry context. Write a brief statement (one paragraph) answering:

- Why does Christian ethics matter to me personally?
- What specific questions or issues do I hope to address?
- How does this connect to my studies in systematic theology, philosophy, and economics?
- What would success look like after 9-12 months of study?

Step 2: Beginner-Level Reading (Weeks 1-4)

Begin with accessible, contemporary introductions that survey the field without assuming prior knowledge. These serve as your "curiosity temperature check" and provide vocabulary and conceptual frameworks for later study.

Title	Author	Notes	In Library
<i>Christian Ethics: Living a Life That Is Pleasing to God</i>	Wayne Grudem	Systematic, accessible survey from Reformed perspective. Start here.	Yes
<i>How to Be Good in a World Gone Bad</i>	James S. Spiegel	Virtue-focused, practically oriented introduction.	Yes
<i>Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World</i>	Dennis Hollinger	Comprehensive evangelical introduction; excellent methodology chapter.	Acquire

Reading Schedule:

- Weeks 1-2: Grudem, Christian Ethics (Part 1: Introduction and Foundations)
- Weeks 3-4: Spiegel, How to Be Good in a World Gone Bad (complete)
- Concurrent: Hollinger, Choosing the Good, chapters 1-4 (methodology)

Step 3: Introductory Online Course (Weeks 5-8)

Supplement your reading with structured lecture content. These courses provide expert guidance and alternative perspectives on the material.

Course	Provider	Notes
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<i>Christian Ethics</i>	BiblicalTraining.org (Craig Blomberg)	Free; evangelical perspective; comprehensive introduction
<i>Ethics Defined (video series)</i>	Ligonier Ministries	Short videos; Reformed perspective; R.C. Sproul and others
<i>Moral Philosophy lectures</i>	The Thomistic Institute (YouTube)	Natural law tradition; Catholic but valuable for all traditions

Phase 1 Milestone:

Write a 500-word reflection on the major approaches to Christian ethics you have encountered (command ethics, virtue ethics, natural law, kingdom ethics). Which approach resonates most with your theological convictions? What questions remain?

Phase 2: Subdiscipline Exploration

Duration: Weeks 9-24 | Step 4 of the Modern Autodidact System

Having established foundational knowledge, you now explore the major subdisciplines of Christian ethics. This phase involves creating focused "mini-courses" on biblical ethics, virtue ethics, applied ethics, and political/natural law ethics.

Subdiscipline A: Biblical Ethics (Weeks 9-14)

The foundation of Christian ethics is Scripture. This unit examines how the Old and New Testaments shape moral vision and practice.

Title	Author	Notes	In Library
<i>The Moral Vision of the New Testament</i>	Richard B. Hays	Canonical. Essential methodology for NT ethics.	Yes
<i>Old Testament Ethics: A Guided Tour</i>	John E. Goldingay	Accessible OT survey; narrative approach.	Yes
<i>Kingdom Ethics (2nd ed.)</i>	Glen H. Stassen & David Gushee	Jesus-centered approach; Sermon on Mount focus.	Yes

Reading Schedule:

- Weeks 9-10: Goldingay, *Old Testament Ethics* (complete)
- Weeks 11-13: Hays, *Moral Vision of the NT*, Parts I-III (method and NT witnesses)
- Week 14: *Kingdom Ethics*, chapters 1-5 (kingdom framework)

Supplementary Resources:

- The Bible Project: "Torah" and "Sermon on the Mount" series (YouTube)
- Open Yale Courses: "Introduction to the Old Testament" (Christine Hayes) - selected lectures on law and ethics

Subdiscipline B: Virtue Ethics and Moral Formation (Weeks 15-18)

The revival of virtue ethics in the late 20th century has profoundly influenced Christian ethics. This unit explores the intersection of classical virtue theory and Christian moral formation.

Title	Author	Notes	In Library
<i>After Virtue</i>	Alasdair MacIntyre	Canonical. Critique of modern ethics; virtue revival.	Yes
<i>The Theory and Practice of Virtue</i>	Gilbert Meilaender	Protestant virtue ethics; bridges philosophy and theology.	Acquire

<i>Excellence: The Character of God and Scholarly Virtue</i>	Andreas Köstenberger	Application to intellectual life and scholarship.	Yes
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Reading Schedule:

- Weeks 15-16: MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapters 1-9, 14-15 (core argument)
- Week 17: Meilaender, *Theory and Practice of Virtue* (complete)
- Week 18: Köstenberger, *Excellence* (complete)

Subdiscipline C: Applied and Bioethics (Weeks 19-22)

Applied ethics addresses concrete moral questions in contemporary life. This unit focuses on bioethics and other contested contemporary issues, developing skills in moral reasoning and case analysis.

Title	Author	Notes	In Library
<i>Bioethics and the Christian Life</i>	David VanDrunen	Reformed covenantal approach to bioethics.	Yes
<i>Ethics for a Brave New World (2nd ed.)</i>	John & Paul Feinberg	Comprehensive evangelical treatment of contested issues.	Yes
<i>Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth</i>	Thaddeus Williams	Careful analysis of social justice questions.	Yes

Reading Schedule:

- Week 19: VanDrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian Life* (complete)
- Weeks 20-21: Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (selected chapters based on interest)
- Week 22: Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* (complete)

Subdiscipline D: Natural Law and Political Theology (Weeks 23-26)

Natural law theory and political theology address how Christians engage public moral discourse and political life. This unit explores Reformed two-kingdoms thought and broader natural law traditions.

Title	Author	Notes	In Library
<i>Divine Covenants and Moral Order</i>	David VanDrunen	Reformed biblical theology of natural law.	Yes
<i>The Abolition of Man</i>	C.S. Lewis	Classic defense of objective moral order (Tao).	Acquire
<i>Why Social Justice Is Not Biblical Justice</i>	Scott David Allen	Critique of contemporary social justice from biblical standpoint.	Yes

Reading Schedule:

- Week 23: Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (complete - short but dense)
- Weeks 24-25: VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* (complete)
- Week 26: Allen, *Why Social Justice Is Not Biblical Justice* (complete)

Phase 2 Milestone:

Choose one contemporary ethical issue (e.g., end-of-life care, economic justice, immigration policy). Write a 1,000-word essay analyzing it from at least two different ethical frameworks studied in Phase 2. Identify which framework you find most compelling and why.

Phase 3: Canonical Works and Deep Reading

Duration: Weeks 27-38 | Step 5 of the Modern Autodidact System

This phase engages the most influential and demanding works in Christian ethics. Read slowly, take extensive notes, and use secondary sources where helpful. These texts will serve as grindstones for sharpening your moral reasoning.

Canonical Works Schedule

Title	Author	Notes	In Library
<i>The Moral Vision of the New Testament (complete)</i>	Richard B. Hays	Complete reading including Part IV (synthesis) and Part V (contemporary issues).	Yes
<i>Self, World, and Time (Ethics as Theology, vol. 1)</i>	Oliver O'Donovan	Foundational moral epistemology. Dense but essential.	Yes
<i>Finding and Seeking (Ethics as Theology, vol. 2)</i>	Oliver O'Donovan	Practical reasoning and moral agency.	Yes
<i>Ethics</i>	Dietrich Bonhoeffer	20th century classic; Christological ethics.	Acquire
<i>After Virtue (complete)</i>	Alasdair MacIntyre	Full reading of remaining chapters not covered in Phase 2.	Yes

Reading Schedule:

- Weeks 27-29: Hays, Moral Vision of the NT, Parts IV-V (synthesis and issues)
- Weeks 30-32: O'Donovan, Self, World, and Time (read slowly; take extensive notes)
- Weeks 33-35: O'Donovan, Finding and Seeking
- Weeks 36-38: Bonhoeffer, Ethics (use Eric Metaxas biography for context)
- Concurrent: Complete remaining chapters of After Virtue

Secondary Resources for Canonical Works:

- For Hays: Book reviews and lectures available through Duke Divinity School
- For O'Donovan: "A Companion to the Thought of Oliver O'Donovan" (Bartholomew & Chaplin)
- For Bonhoeffer: "Bonhoeffer's Ethics" (Brian Brock) or "Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker" for accessible context
- For MacIntyre: Online lecture summaries; "After MacIntyre" (Horton & Mendus) for critical responses

Phase 3 Milestone:

Create a comparative analysis (2,000 words) examining how Hays, O'Donovan, and Bonhoeffer each approach the relationship between Scripture and ethics. How do their

methodologies differ? What does each contribute to your understanding of Christian moral reasoning?

Phase 4: Synthesis and Content Creation

Duration: Weeks 39-44 | Step 6 of the Modern Autodidact System

The best way to internalize knowledge is to create with it. This phase focuses on synthesis projects that force you to articulate and apply what you have learned. Choose at least two of the following projects.

Synthesis Project Options

Option A: Commonplace Book Compilation

Compile your notes from the course into an organized commonplace book. Include key quotations, your reflections, and connections to other areas of study (theology, philosophy, economics). Organize thematically rather than by book.

Option B: Teaching Document

Write an introductory guide (5,000-7,000 words) to Christian ethics for someone beginning their studies. Cover major approaches, key thinkers, and recommended reading. This could serve as a resource for a church small group or study circle.

Option C: Case Study Analysis

Develop three detailed case studies on contemporary ethical issues. For each, provide background, identify the key moral questions, analyze from multiple Christian ethical perspectives, and offer a reasoned conclusion. Include discussion questions for group use.

Option D: Comparative Review Essay

Write a substantial review essay (3,000-4,000 words) comparing two or three books from your course. Situate them within the broader field, evaluate their contributions, and assess their usefulness for different audiences. Submit to a theology blog or journal.

Option E: Personal Ethical Framework

Articulate your own approach to Christian ethics in a systematic statement (3,000 words). Draw on your Reformed theological commitments while engaging the various approaches studied. Address: your starting point, the role of Scripture, natural law, virtue formation, and practical application.

Phase 5: Specialization and Continuation

Duration: Weeks 45-52+ | Step 7 of the Modern Autodidact System

Having established a foundation, you are now equipped to pursue specialized interests within Christian ethics. This phase is self-directed based on the areas that most captured your attention during the course.

Suggested Specialization Tracks

Track A: Historical Christian Ethics

- Augustine, City of God (Books XIV, XIX)
- Aquinas, Summa Theologiae (Prima Secundae, Questions 90-97 on Law)
- Calvin, Institutes (Book II, chapters 7-8; Book IV, chapter 20)
- Jonathan Edwards, The Nature of True Virtue

Track B: Advanced Bioethics

- Gilbert Meilaender, Bioethics: A Primer for Christians
- Leon Kass, Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity
- O. Carter Snead, What It Means to Be Human
- The President's Council on Bioethics reports (available online)

Track C: Political Theology and Public Ethics

- Oliver O'Donovan, The Desire of the Nations
- James Davison Hunter, To Change the World
- Jonathan Leeman, Political Church
- VanDrunen, Living in God's Two Kingdoms

Track D: Virtue Ethics Deep Dive

- Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
- Stanley Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom
- Josef Pieper, The Four Cardinal Virtues
- Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Glittering Vices

Complete Resource List

Books from Your Library (15 titles)

The following books from your current collection are incorporated into this course:

Title	Author	Phase
<i>Christian Ethics</i>	Wayne Grudem	1
<i>How to Be Good in a World Gone Bad</i>	James S. Spiegel	1
<i>The Moral Vision of the New Testament</i>	Richard B. Hays	2, 3
<i>Kingdom Ethics</i>	Glen H. Stassen	2
<i>Old Testament Ethics: A Guided Tour</i>	John E. Goldingay	2
<i>After Virtue</i>	Alasdair MacIntyre	2, 3
<i>Excellence</i>	Andreas Köstenberger	2
<i>Bioethics and the Christian Life</i>	David VanDrunen	2
<i>Divine Covenants and Moral Order</i>	David VanDrunen	2
<i>Ethics for a Brave New World</i>	John S. Feinberg	2
<i>Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth</i>	Thaddeus Williams	2
<i>Why Social Justice Is Not Biblical Justice</i>	Scott David Allen	2
<i>Self, World, and Time (Ethics as Theology #1)</i>	Oliver O'Donovan	3
<i>Finding and Seeking (Ethics as Theology #2)</i>	Oliver O'Donovan	3

Note: HumanKind (Aronson) is available for supplementary reading on practical compassion and neighbor-love.

Books to Acquire (4 titles)

The following essential texts should be added to your library:

Title	Author	Rationale
<i>Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World</i>	Dennis Hollinger	Best evangelical intro to ethical methodology
<i>The Theory and Practice of Virtue</i>	Gilbert Meilaender	Bridges MacIntyre to Protestant thought
<i>The Abolition of Man</i>	C.S. Lewis	Essential natural law defense; short but foundational
<i>Ethics</i>	Dietrich Bonhoeffer	20th century canonical work; Christological ethics

Supplementary Resources

Online Courses and Lectures

- BiblicalTraining.org - Christian Ethics (Craig Blomberg) - Free
- Ligonier Ministries - Ethics Defined series - Free
- The Thomistic Institute - Moral Philosophy lectures (YouTube) - Free
- Yale Divinity School - Various lectures on Christian ethics (iTunes U) - Free
- The Gospel Coalition - Ethics and Culture content - Free

Podcasts

- Theology in the Raw (Preston Sprinkle) - Engaging controversial ethical topics
- The Ezra Institute Podcast - Cultural engagement and ethics
- The Moral Imagination (Karen Swallow Prior & others) - Literary and ethical formation

YouTube Channels

- The Bible Project - Biblical theology foundations
- Desiring God - Various speakers on Christian living
- Word on Fire Institute - Catholic perspective on natural law (valuable ecumenical resource)

Reference Works

- Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics (ed. Joel Green) - Essential reference
- New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology (ed. Atkinson & Field)
- The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics - Academic reference

Study Guidelines

Daily Practice

Maintain 1-2 hours of daily study. Favor consistent, moderate effort over intensive cramming. Take Sundays as a rest from formal study while allowing the material to percolate through reflection and conversation.

Note-Taking

Maintain a dedicated notebook for Christian ethics. Record key arguments, important quotations, questions that arise, and connections to your other studies in theology, philosophy, and economics. Review notes weekly to reinforce retention.

Charitable Engagement

This course includes voices from various Christian traditions (Reformed, Catholic, Anglican, Anabaptist). Engage charitably with positions that differ from your own theological convictions. Understanding opposing viewpoints strengthens your own reasoning and equips you for thoughtful dialogue.

Integration

Look for connections between this course and your concurrent studies. Christian ethics intersects naturally with systematic theology (doctrine of sanctification, law and gospel), philosophy (metaethics, political philosophy), and economics (justice, property, stewardship). Note these connections as they arise.

Community

Consider finding a discussion partner or small group to process the material. Ethics is inherently communal; moral formation happens in the context of relationships. Even informal conversations about your reading will deepen understanding and retention.

*Course specification prepared following The Modern Autodidact System
Estimated completion: 9-12 months with consistent daily study*