

Essay Title:

**Why is doing good things so difficult?
How might the Christian ethical
tradition answer this?**

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Introduction

The difficulty of doing good, even when one recognises what is right, lies at the heart of Christian ethics. While many ethical systems assume that knowledge of the good naturally leads to moral action, the Christian tradition presents a more complex account of human moral capacity. This tension is clearly articulated in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where Paul the Apostle states that he does not do the good he desires but instead does the evil he hates (Romans 7:15). This suggests that moral failure is not merely a matter of ignorance but reflects a deeper disorder within human nature. This essay will argue that Christian ethics explains the difficulty of doing good through sin, disordered desires, and weakness of the will, while also offering responses through virtue, grace, and personal transformation. Drawing on Scripture, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and C. S. Lewis, this essay demonstrates that moral struggle is both a defining feature of human existence and a central focus of Christian ethical reflection.

The Difficulty of Doing Good: Biblical Foundations

A central claim within Christian ethics is that human beings frequently fail to act in accordance with what they know to be good. This is most clearly expressed in Romans 7:14-25, where Paul describes a profound internal conflict between moral knowledge and action. He affirms the goodness of the law yet confesses his inability to fulfil it, stating that he does what he hates rather than what he wills. This indicates that moral failure arises not from ignorance but from a divided self. As N. T. Wright suggests, Paul's account reflects a universal human condition in which the law reveals what is right but does not enable individuals to fulfil it, leaving them caught in an ongoing struggle with sin.¹ This is further reinforced in Galatians 5:17, where Paul

¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans* (London: SPCK, 2004), pp. 116–120.

states that the desires of the flesh are opposed to those of the Spirit, highlighting an ongoing internal struggle that further contributes to the difficulty of consistently doing good.

Similarly, in Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount intensifies moral expectations by extending them beyond external actions to internal intentions. Jesus teaches that anger is morally equivalent to murder and lust to adultery, thereby raising the ethical standard significantly. As Glen H. Stassen argues, the Sermon on the Mount presents a transformative vision of ethics in which Jesus' teachings are intended to be practised, and not only admired, thus emphasising concrete moral transformation rather than simple outward compliance.²

This biblical evidence demonstrates that doing good is difficult both because of internal moral conflict and the demanding nature of divine law. However, this account may be criticised for setting an ideal that appears unattainable. As Stanley Hauerwas suggests, Christian ethics can appear highly demanding, since it requires not only moral action but the transformation of one's life through following Jesus.³ Nevertheless, this high standard functions not to discourage moral effort but to reveal the depth of human limitation and the need for transformation in the first instance, thereby reinforcing the Christian explanation of why moral action is so challenging in practice.

This tension between knowing and doing the good is not limited to Paul but is echoed elsewhere in the New Testament. In James 1:22, believers are instructed to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only," highlighting the persistent gap between moral understanding and moral action. This reinforces the idea that ethical failure is not simply due to lack of knowledge but reflects a deeper inability to act upon what is known. Together, these passages suggest that the difficulty of doing good is a consistent biblical theme, rooted in the human condition rather than isolated moral weakness.

² Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), pp. 130–135.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 72–74.

This not only strengthens Paul's diagnosis but also demonstrates that the challenge of moral action is embedded across the wider scriptural tradition, directly addressing the question of why doing good is so persistently difficult.

Theological Explanation: Sin and Human Nature

Christian theology deepens this biblical account by locating the difficulty of doing good within the nature of humanity itself. Augustine of Hippo provides a particularly influential explanation in his *Confessions*, where he describes his moral struggle as a conflict within the will.⁴ He recognises the good yet finds himself unable to pursue it consistently, illustrating a divided self. This is echoed in James 1:14-15, where desire is portrayed as leading to sin, reinforcing the idea that moral failure originates within the individual, and thus contributing to the difficulty of consistently doing what is right.

Augustine explains this condition through the doctrine of Original Sin, which holds that the Fall has corrupted human nature, disordering desires and weakening the will. Psalm 51:5 reflects this view, suggesting that sin is present from birth rather than merely acquired through action. As James Wetzel observes, Augustine's account highlights the limits of human moral capacity by showing that the will is not fully under rational control.⁵ This is further supported by Eleonore Stump, who notes that Augustine's psychology presents the will as fractured and internally conflicted.⁶

Augustine develops this idea through his concept of disordered love, arguing that sin arises not from a lack of love but from loving the wrong things in the wrong order, especially placing lesser goods above God. This helps explain why doing good is difficult: moral failure is rooted in misdirected desire rather

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VIII, pp. 140–148.

⁵ James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 88–101.

⁶ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 399–400.

than simple ignorance, revealing a deeper disorder within the will.⁷ As James Wetzel argues, Augustine's ethical framework is concerned not simply with actions but with the inner ordering of human desires and motivations.⁸ Consequently, moral transformation requires not only right action but the reordering of desire. However, this view may be criticised for portraying human nature as fundamentally flawed. Yet it remains persuasive in explaining why individuals knowingly act against their better judgement, suggesting that moral failure is not merely intellectual but deeply rooted in human desire.

However, this account can be criticised for its pessimistic view of human nature. As Alasdair MacIntyre suggests, Augustine's emphasis on disordered desire risks portraying human moral agency as significantly weakened.⁹ Nevertheless, Augustine's explanation remains compelling because it aligns closely with the lived experience of moral struggle described in Scripture. It demonstrates that the difficulty of doing good is not merely external but rooted in the very structure of human desire and will, thereby offering a comprehensive answer to why moral action is so persistently difficult.

Christian Ethical Responses: Virtue, Grace, and Transformation

In response to this diagnosis, Christian ethics offers several complementary approaches to overcoming moral difficulty. Thomas Aquinas emphasises the role of virtue, arguing that moral goodness arises through the development of stable habits that enable individuals to act rightly.¹⁰ Drawing on Aristotle, he argues that individuals must be formed over time, since knowledge alone is

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, II, pp. 24–30.

⁸ Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, pp. 98–101.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 117–119.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q.55, a.1.

not enough to produce moral action. As Servais Pinckaers explains, Aquinas understands virtue as a practical process through which individuals gradually become capable of genuine moral action.¹¹

However, Aquinas does not ignore the effects of sin, but instead incorporates them into an account of moral growth through the development of virtue.¹² This approach can be criticised for potentially underestimating the depth of sin emphasised by Augustine. Nevertheless, it offers a constructive explanation of how individuals can begin to overcome moral weakness.

In contrast, Martin Luther emphasises the necessity of divine grace, arguing that human beings are incapable of achieving righteousness through their own efforts.¹³ As Alister McGrath explains, Luther views grace as essential because the human will is fundamentally bound by sin.¹⁴ While this may appear to diminish human autonomy, it reinforces the Christian claim that transformation is dependent on God rather than human effort.

A modern articulation of these ideas is found in C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, where he argues that morality involves the transformation of the self rather than mere behavioural conformity.¹⁵ Lewis suggests that doing good is difficult because it requires becoming a different kind of person, not simply following rules; as he explains, "every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you... into something a little different from what it was before."¹⁶ As Gilbert Meilaender observes, Lewis's moral thought emphasises the transformation of the self and the shaping of character, rather than merely external actions.¹⁷

¹¹ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 389–395.

¹² Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 243.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, trans. by W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), pp. 10–14.

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 354–356.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 80–82.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 82–83.

¹⁷ Gilbert Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 20–30.

While Aquinas presents a relatively optimistic account of moral development through virtue, this is challenged by Luther's more pessimistic view of human nature, in which human beings are incapable of achieving righteousness through their own efforts. This highlights a key tension within Christian ethics between moral formation and dependence upon divine grace. However, Lewis offers a more integrated perspective, suggesting that moral transformation involves both human effort and divine assistance. By framing ethics as the transformation of the self rather than mere compliance, Lewis bridges the gap between virtue and grace, presenting a more holistic account of how individuals may overcome moral difficulty, and thus providing a particularly comprehensive response to the question.

Together, these approaches demonstrate that Christian ethics offers a comprehensive response to moral difficulty, combining virtue, grace, and transformation. This integrated framework provides both a practical and theological solution to the problem identified in Scripture and developed by Augustine.

Critical Evaluation

The Christian explanation for the difficulty of doing good is compelling in its recognition of human moral complexity. By acknowledging internal conflict, disordered desire, and the limits of human effort, it offers an account that reflects real human experience. The integration of biblical, Augustinian, and Thomistic perspectives provides both depth and coherence. However, this account is not without its challenges.

One significant criticism is that the doctrine of sin may present an overly pessimistic view of human nature. Secular ethicists such as Peter Singer argue that moral failure can often be addressed through rational reflection, ethical education, and improved social conditions rather than theological

explanation.¹⁸ From this perspective, moral progress is achievable through human effort alone, without recourse to doctrines such as original sin or divine grace. Additionally, the emphasis on grace may raise concerns about moral responsibility, appearing to locate the source of moral transformation outside the individual. While Peter Singer focuses on external behaviour and outcomes, the Christian tradition addresses the deeper condition of the will.

However, such criticisms may underestimate the depth of the problem identified within the Christian tradition. As Augustine of Hippo argues, the human will is disordered by sin, such that individuals may know the good yet remain unable to perform it consistently.¹⁹ This diagnosis is echoed in modern theology; as Alister McGrath notes, grace is necessary precisely because human beings are incapable of effecting their own transformation.²⁰ Similarly, C. S. Lewis emphasises that morality is not merely about rule-following but about the transformation of the self, such that “every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you... into something a little different from what it was before.”²¹ This process of moral formation ultimately points beyond behavioural improvement to a more radical transformation, as Lewis later argues that Christianity aims not merely to make people ‘nice’ but to create a “New Man.”²²

This suggests that moral failure cannot be fully explained by ignorance or poor social conditions alone, but involves a deeper disorder within the human person. The persistence of wrongdoing even among well-informed individuals supports this diagnosis, indicating that knowledge is insufficient to produce genuine moral change.

Furthermore, Christian ethics does not understand grace as replacing human effort but as enabling it. As Thomas Aquinas argues, grace does not destroy

¹⁸ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–4.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, pp. 144–148.

²⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pp. 354–356.

²¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 82–83.

²² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 214–216.

human nature but perfects it, allowing individuals to act in accordance with the good.²³ Rather than diminishing responsibility, grace empowers individuals to act in ways that would otherwise be unattainable. In this respect, the Christian account offers a more comprehensive explanation of moral life, holding together both human limitation and the real possibility of transformation. While secular approaches rightly emphasise education and social reform, they may lack the resources to account for the enduring depth of moral failure, which the Christian tradition seeks to address at the level of the will and the self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Christian ethics explains the difficulty of doing good through a multifaceted account of human nature. Scripture reveals a fundamental tension between knowledge and action, while Augustine locates this struggle in disordered desire and a divided will. Aquinas offers a constructive response through virtue, and Luther emphasises the necessity of grace, both of which are synthesised in Lewis's account of moral transformation. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that moral difficulty is not merely a failure of knowledge but a deeper problem rooted in human nature itself. However, Christian ethics does not end with diagnosis; it offers a path toward transformation through virtue, grace, and relationship with God. Ultimately, the Christian ethical tradition presents a vision of moral life that is both realistic in its understanding of human weakness and hopeful in its account of the possibility of change.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.109, a.2.

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