

## Values in ACT and Christian Ethics/Virtues

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is based on the 'pragmatic truth criterion', which means that the therapist analyses your input from the point of view of 'what works'.

Workability is determined by your values, or what you state as being important to you. Since you began therapy, you and your therapist have probably been jointly doing a 'conceptualization' of what has brought you to therapy in the first place. Now it is time to take action and go forward; that is when values become very important.

Your therapist does not have to be a Christian in order to carry out values work with you, because a professional ACT therapist focuses on what is important to you, as stated by you, and does not allow what they think is important, or what they think you should think, to influence them. The skills of acceptance, defusion, present moment awareness and a flexible sense of self are also being practised by your therapist as the work continues and they help him, just as they help you, not to judge.

The process you are going to work on now is called 'defining values'. This can be a very sticky area for Christians, for a number of reasons.

Firstly the word 'values' may have certain connotations for you, or your church leaders and teachers. This word is used very specifically in ACT and the meaning will be discussed, together with alternative terms such as 'Christian Ethics', and 'Christian virtues'.

Secondly, it may be difficult for you to think in this way, because you are not used to it. That is why later on there are examples of ethics and/or virtues to help you with this task.

Finally, there will be a few verses to help you to incorporate valued living into your daily experience.

Firstly, let's look at what 'values' in ACT refers to. You may have already been told that this therapy uses behaviour analysis to try and understand your behaviour. Included in this analysis are observable behaviours and also thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. There is no need for you to understand why all these internal happenings are included as behaviour - but if you want to you can find out more on the ACBS website.

The concept of reinforcement is an essential part of influencing behaviour change, either positively or negatively. This is built into the following definition of values in ACT: “*freely chosen, verbally constructed (spoken in words or described) consequences of ongoing, dynamic, evolving patterns of activity (external behaviour and internal happenings) which establish (bring to awareness) predominant reinforcers (strengthening) for that activity which are intrinsic (built into) in engagement (taking part in) in the valued pattern itself.*” (Wilson 2008, p64). (Italics in brackets are my interpretation of the meaning of the words used.)

So, when working with this process, your therapist is engaged in helping you to describe *your own values/ethics/virtues* (you choose what you want to call them) in *your own* words.

As mentioned, your therapist is well-trained and undoubtedly skilful, in not judging your choices and will help you to form the descriptions in a way that works best for you. By putting them into words, you help yourself to recognise when you are taking even tiny steps in that direction and that, in itself, produces a positive feeling of vitality, which encourages you to carry on taking steps in that direction. That is why you may be asked the question: ‘Does that (behaviour) work for you?’ or something similar to that.

Before we go on to discuss the different connotations that the word ‘values’ may have for you, I would just like to draw your attention to the previous sentence. The question: ‘Does that work for you’ may sound different from what you are used to, and maybe even wrong. If your therapist uses the phrase ‘does that work for you’, please understand that they are not advocating that you should not, or need not, have moral standards. It is merely a way of drawing your attention to whether you are moving in the direction of your own values, or not.

It is not an encouragement to suspend your morals, nor is it an indication that your therapist has done so! This may be very different from how other counsellors have spoken to you, it is simply a reminder that your behaviour is not being judged against anyone’s standards but the ones you have chosen.

Let’s look at the word ‘values’ now, and the use of this word in the study of ethics. (Much of this information is taken from the book: *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, by Kerby Andersen (2005).

If you have been to ethics classes, you may have learned that values clarification is an exercise where each person decides what is right or wrong for themselves. You

will also, probably, have been taught not to judge another person's behaviour by assuming that there are absolute standards of right and wrong, that are the same as yours, and that apply to everybody.

If this is the case and you are a Christian, you may find the word 'values' distasteful, and prefer to use the word 'ethics'. (This is a very blunt way of describing what is, actually, quite a useful process in the study of ethics, especially when preparing to work cross-culturally).

Alternatively, the word 'virtues' might be more acceptable as terminology to describe your desired direction. In his book *'Not the End but the Road'*, Gary Thomas introduces virtues in this way: *"For centuries, Christian teachers have spoken about 'practicing the virtues of Christ.' By this they mean imitating the inner orientations and behaviours evidenced in the life of Jesus while He walked on earth – toward the goal of a mature character. While salvation is a work that is done entirely within God's mercy and without human effort (see Romans 9:16), growth in Christ involves cooperation between God and His children (see 1 John 3:3; Philippians 2:12,13). Just as bodybuilders use weights to shape their physiques, so Christians can 'work out' their faith by practicing the virtues, understanding that holiness won't 'suddenly appear' just because they prayed a prayer of salvation."* (2004, p9)

Whatever word you choose, make sure that you understand that these are qualities that you wish to develop in your own life and which are to be defined by you according to what you want - not what you think others or society or your group might consider important. They may be similar, but it is important that you decide what they are to be.

To help with this choice, here are two lists – one of ethics as defined by Andersen (2005) and one of virtues as listed by Thomas (2004).

### **Ethics:**

- 'Biblical ethics rests on the belief in absolute truth' (p2)
- 'a person's faith commitment definitely affects his or her perspective on moral issues' (p2)
- 'A Christian understanding of ethics and philosophy begins with the assumption that God exists and has revealed Himself to the human race' (p20)

- ‘God’s character is the ultimate standard of right and wrong’ Biblical morality can be developed from learning to live God’s way according to biblical principles. Though the Christian life is much more than a set of rules or principles, these principles do provide moral boundaries for behaviour.’ (p20)

The Old Testament focussed on social ethics, the New Testament on personal ethics. This does not mean that the Old Testament moral code was abolished (Matthew 5:17-19). In fact, these verses are taken from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus criticized the Pharisees misuse and misinterpretation of Old Testament law. He focussed on inward motives (Matthew 5:21,22) as being more indicative of a person’s moral standing than outward rule-keeping. This is consistent with teaching from the Old Testament (Hosea 6:6 and many other places) and with teaching throughout the New Testament.

The teaching of Jesus contained a very strong social dimension (Matthew 5:33-48), as did many of his parables, for example, the story of the Good Samaritan. This is a key moral foundation, as is indicated by the second greatest commandment, as expressed by Jesus: “*Love your neighbour as yourself.*” (Luke 10:27).

The Bible does have specific instructions about how we should conduct ourselves in the different relationships that we encounter, and the different roles that we occupy. Many of these are noted in *Appendix 9: ‘Verses about Values and Committed Action’*. Although the Bible does provide these guidelines, it also advocates personal choice on matters of moral neutrality, as long as one’s choice does not offend others. Romans 14 verses 1 through 18 deal with this in some detail.

### **Some of the specific qualities that provide the foundation for Christian ethics are:**

- Love
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Civility

These may provide some ideas for you in your construction of what you want your life to be about, as may some of the following **virtues**:

- Humility
- Surrender

- Detachment
- Love
- Chastity
- Generosity
- Vigilance
- Patience
- Discernment
- Thankfulness
- Gentleness
- Fortitude
- Obedience
- Penitence

A few verses of scripture which may help you in this process of choosing:

**Romans 12: 1&2:** *“So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.” (MSG)*

**Romans 12: 6-12:** *“Let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't. If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else;*

*if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching;*

*if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.*

*Love from the centre of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.*

*Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.*

*Don't burn out; keep yourselves fuelled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.”(MSG)*

**Romans 12:17-19:** *“Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone.*

*If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.*

*Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.'” (MSG)*