

“What’s Right and What’s Wrong?” (Part 1)

Roughly 3,000 years ago, during the period of the Judges, the writer of the Book of Judges ends that Old Testament book with these words: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). *All the people did what was right in their own eyes!* Some say that’s a description of what’s happening in our society today. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes!

It would be hard to deny that moral values have changed – and are changing. Things regarded as wrong 25, 35 years ago, are now accepted as being OK. Here’s a quote: The sharp lines between right and wrong are blurred...we have moved from a rural culture to an anonymous urban society. There is a relaxation of controls and an increasing tolerance of all varieties of behavior patterns. We live in a pluralistic society where no single religious group is in the majority to impose its standards on the whole. There has been a decline of authority in family and church.” Interesting thing is, that was written almost 50 years ago! But, I believe that it’s even truer today.

How do we decide what’s right and what’s wrong? *Who* decides what’s right and what’s wrong? If we commit to following Jesus, we are given a new life in Him – and this new life in Christ is to be morally clean and pure. Being a Christian is more than just being a person of high moral standards, but being a Christian certainly should include that!

So, how can we make moral choices consistent with God’s will? How can we decide what’s right and what’s wrong? Let’s look at this question today. Originally, I intended this to be one sermon – but as I prepared it, I realized that I would need 2 messages to say all I want to say on this important subject.

First of all, let’s look at *ways of deciding what’s right and what’s wrong that are insufficient and unreliable*. The first is, *I decide for myself what’s right and what’s wrong*. This is the modern version of Judges 21:25 – everyone did what was right in their own eyes!

Our society used to be rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition and values. The Bible was regarded as a sacred book, and even if you weren’t a Christian or even that moral, you at least regarded the Bible as something special and holy. Most everybody assumed that there are laws of God, moral laws, given by God, that are fixed and transcendent. This is no longer the case. Many people simply do not regard the Bible as a divinely inspired writing that has any authority over how we live our lives.

For instance, I’ve read some of the letters to the editor of the newspaper when people respond to some moral issue. Some responders might quote from the Bible, and invariably others will in response belittle the Bible in some way, or question why this outdated book should determine how we act today.

Instead of believing in fixed moral laws, handed down by God, *moral relativism* has been creeping into our culture for a number of years. This was first espoused in the academic community (secular colleges and universities), and now has filtered down into much of modern

life. With moral relativism, there are no divinely established moral principles that govern life. So, as a result, many people set up their own standards of behavior.

There was an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer about actress Jessica Alba. She was raised Catholic, then left the Catholic Church and went to an evangelical church. But she wound up leaving that church because she didn't agree with the church's stance on certain moral issues, including premarital sex. She said, "In my church, it was...premarital sex is evil". She didn't agree. As a result, she abandoned organized religion totally, and opted for a more "spiritual experience." So, basically what she did was to ditch traditional moral teaching and *decide for herself* what was right and what was wrong.

Let's suppose that we have a world where everyone decides for themselves what's appropriate behavior. What kind of world would this be? If I see something you have and I want it, I just take it...your porch furniture, your pocketbook, your wife. If I think the 35 mile speed limit through my town is too slow, and I decide to go 55 or 60 down crowded Main Street, there's nothing wrong with that. But what if what I think is OK and feels good to me infringes on *your* rights or *your* wellbeing? This would be a chaotic world...an unsafe world.

If you look at what was happening when the writer of Judges 21:25 says everyone did what was right in own eyes, you will see that that particular society was thoroughly *chaotic and corrupt through and through*. So, setting our own moral standards and deciding for ourselves what's right and wrong is insufficient.

Similar to this is the notion that "the community" decides what's right and what's wrong. Many cultural observers say we are living in a "postmodern" era, that we've moved from the "modern" era, the 20th century, where reason and science and technology ruled as king – to a different way of seeing life. One part of "postmodernism" is the belief that there are *no absolute moral values*. Right and wrong are determined by the *community values* of that particular time.

But that has its flaws. In some Muslim communities (Muslim countries, Muslim states), women have few rights. They have to cover their faces in public; they are denied an education; they have little voice in the home or the political arena. Women are at the mercy of the whims and wants of the men in their life. Also, how reliable a value system would you have if you let the student population of the local high school set all the moral standards?

So, having *each community* set the boundaries of right and wrong is as flawed as letting each individual set their own moral boundaries.

A third way of deciding what's right and what's wrong that does not cut it is to decide on the basis of *popular opinion, or everybody's doing it*. If the majority of people feel that gambling and playing the lottery is ok, because a lot of people (including Christians) are doing it, then it's right. If most couples live together before they get married, this means it is morally right. If most people cheat on their income tax returns, then there's nothing wrong with it. This is "consensus morality" – something is right because everybody's doing it.

Abraham Lincoln once asked a group: “How many legs would a sheep have if you called its tail a leg?” Somebody said, “Five”. President Lincoln replied, “No it wouldn’t; it would only have four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it one.” Some of the greatest moral reformers in the Bible and human history have dared to speak out as lonely voices against the popular and prevailing moral behaviors of their time.

Another less than satisfactory way of deciding what’s right and what’s wrong is to base our moral decisions on *conscience*. Now conscience can be a good thing - that little voice inside us that makes us feel good when we do what’s right, and guilty when we do wrong. But conscience, in itself, is not always dependable. The level of conscience varies from individual to individual – what bothers one person and makes her feel guilty may not bother another person at all. For instance, there are psychopaths and sociopaths who can do terrible things and have no qualms of conscience doing it. And in some cultures, one of the ways of showing hospitality to a male guest is to offer your wife or women in the household for sex during their stay! In other cultures, wife swapping is part of the accepted culture. It doesn’t violate their conscience.

So, to say, “Just let your conscience be your guide” is not always a reliable way of discerning right from wrong.

A final way of deciding between right and wrong that is insufficient is to base our moral decisions on *the law*. This may surprise you when I say this! Many Christians say, “We just need to follow the Ten Commandments, we just have to obey God’s laws in the Bible, and we’ll be on solid moral ground.” Certainly, the law can be a pretty good guide for our conduct! Generally speaking, the laws of God found in the Bible are a reliable guide for moral living. They provide order and structure for society and for our personal lives. But the law is not the foolproof solution!

For example, some laws may not go far enough! A 58-year old woman was raped in broad daylight in Atlantic City. She pleaded with 3 bystanders to call the police, but they didn’t. They just walked off. They broke no laws – but what about their moral conduct? The family of Corrie ten Boom hid Jews in their homes during the Nazi occupation of Holland. They broke the commandment, “You shall not bear false witness” – they lied to the Nazi’s, but they saved many lives. Are there not times when *persons* are more important than *laws*? (Jesus made that point in some of the conflict He had with scribes and Pharisees).

Another reason that laws in themselves are not enough to help us make moral decisions is that some laws are outdated...or unfair...or even silly! Did you know that in state of Pennsylvania it is illegal to sleep on top of a refrigerator outdoors. It’s illegal to catch fish with your bare hands or your mouth. Fortune-telling, Tarot Card reading for profit is illegal. A person is not eligible to become Governor if he/she has participated in a duel. Children’s bedrooms need to be within 200 feet of a bathroom. (Old men’s bedrooms too, perhaps?). Here are more Pennsylvania laws. A special cleaning ordinance bans housewives from hiding dirt and dust under a rug in a dwelling. And finally, any motorist who sights a team of horses coming toward him must pull well off the road, cover his car with a blanket or canvas that blends with the countryside, and let

the horses pass. With the current explosion of technology and the fast-paced changes it brings, it's hard to pass and maintain laws that are relevant to the changes – such as copyright laws for music, laws to regulate artificial intelligence, etc.

Then there are these laws in our Bible. Leviticus 19:19: “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.” (Any of us break that law?). Leviticus 19:27 says, “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.”

Some laws are harsh: In Leviticus 20, adultery and other sexual sins are punishable by death! Probably most Christians believe some of the dietary laws and laws pertaining to animal sacrifices found in the Old Testament no longer apply since the coming of Jesus. Laws, in themselves, while important, do not provide all we need to make moral choices.

I've taken a lot of time looking at ways of deciding right from wrong that miss the mark. How then can we decide what's right and what's wrong? A key element here has to do with a four letter word! (No, it's not a bad word...it's a good word).

The word is L O V E! Love! Love is a key element in true morality...in deciding right from wrong.

Next week I want to talk about the part love plays in making moral decisions, and how the presence or absence of love helps determine whether we're doing good or bad.

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