

## “What’s Right and What’s Wrong?” (Part 2)

Last week I preached the first of 2 messages on how we can decide what’s right and what’s wrong. If we’re followers of Jesus we should *want* to have high moral standards, and do what’s right! But how do we decide right from wrong?

We looked at some ways people make moral decisions that are unreliable: I do what I think is right. The “community” (social groupings) determines what’s right or wrong. Prevailing opinions – if everybody’s doing it, it must be ok. Conscience. And finally, the law.

As I said last week, perhaps the most surprising one on this list is “the law” – that even just strict observance of laws and commandments will not provide all the guidance we need for ethical living. One reason is, some laws just don’t go far enough. e.g. We may ignore someone in need of help. We may not have broken any law, but is this inaction “moral”? Also, some laws are outdated and no longer relevant to life today – even some of the ritual and dietary laws of the Old Testament. Then too, some laws are unfair and unjust – such as the segregation laws that were part of our country prior to the Civil Rights Movement.

I ended last week’s message by saying a key to making healthy moral choices and doing the right thing is a four letter word: L O V E. *Love is the crucial element in true morality.* When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment, what was His answer? “One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31).

How does God expect us to live? What’s the whole purpose of life? It is summed up in two commands: (1) Love God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; (2) Love your neighbor as yourself.

There are other Scriptures that make this point. Galatians 5:13-14 “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” All of the law...all of the commandments we find in the Bible, can be summed up in one word: *love!* If we love people and treat them with love, we are fulfilling the commandments and doing what is right!

This same theme is found in Romans 13:8-10: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

“The one who loves another has fulfilled the law...” (verse 8). Then this passage refers to

specific commandments: “You shall not commit adultery” – if I truly love you, I won’t have an affair with your wife. If I love my wife and children, I won’t have an affair with anyone! “You shall not murder” – if you love me, you’re not going to murder me! “You shall not steal” - if I love you, I’m not going to cheat you out of money, or break into your home and take something in there I like. “You shall not covet” - if I genuinely love somebody, I’m not going to covet their wealth or good fortune; if I somehow manage to get a coworker replaced or fired so I can have their job, I’m not showing love to that person.

“Love does no harm to its neighbor...” . *If I can treat everyone with LOVE, I’m going to be doing the moral and ethical thing.*

Now it’s important to remember what “love” is. The word most often used in the Bible is the Greek word *agape*. It’s not just warm feelings toward another person. Love is not feelings but actions – it is acting with the other person’s interest at heart – wanting no evil to come on that person. Treating people in a way that shows we really want the best for them. So, if I really love you, I may not always like you, or feel warm fuzzies towards you...but I will treat you in a way that genuinely seeks your good.

Using love as the basis for all moral decisions shows that *people* are more important than *laws*. On different occasions Jesus showed us that people are more important than laws. “He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?’ so that they might accuse him. He said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.’ Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other” (Matthew 12:9-13).

One of the 10 commandments is to honor the Sabbath, to not work but rest. The Pharisees elaborated on this commandment by writing a whole list of regulations to define what constituted “work”. What one could or could not do. These laws allowed a person to rescue an animal on the Sabbath, but forbid healing a person (unless their life was in danger). Jesus often ignored these laws. Here, He healed a man, He broke the “law”, and the religious leaders got ballistic on Him. But to Jesus, *people* are more important than *laws*!

So, I’ve been making the point that at the heart of true morality is love. *Do the loving thing in each situation, and we will be doing what’s right.* Back when I was in theological seminary, there was something called “situation ethics” (or “contextual ethics”) that was much in vogue and very popular. Situation ethics said that there are no laws or commands that can cover every situation. Therefore, in each situation, to do right, one has to ask the question: “What is the loving thing to do?”

Situation ethics has a lot to say in its favor. It reminds us that sometimes laws don’t go far enough (as I’ve already pointed out)...that there are no laws to cover every set of circumstances...and that people and their needs are more important than laws.

But there are some difficulties with situation ethics! (Can you think what might that might be?). The huge question is: How do I decide what's the "loving thing" to do for each situation? For one thing, *we are all sinners*, and our decision-making can be distorted because we often see things through the lens of our own *self-interest* – and our judgment is blurred by the self-centeredness that marks the human condition. Also, because we're human, our perspective is often narrow and limited. When we're trying to do "the loving thing" we often don't see the whole picture.

Another difficulty in "doing the loving thing" in each set of circumstances is that often we're caught up in the emotions of the moment – and emotion often wins out over logic and reason. When a teenage couple are alone in a parked car in deserted spot, or by themselves in a parents' house when the parents aren't home, and caught up in passionate moment, you can't always count on them to objectively "do the loving thing", and act with everyone's long term wellbeing in mind. If I'm ticked off at someone, or angry about a situation, I may not be thinking clearly about the loving way to respond. Because we humans are limited in our perspective, and often act irrationally or out of self-interest, it may be difficult for us to discern what is the "loving thing" to do.

So, where does all of this leave us? How *do* we decide what's right and what's wrong? Let's start by going back to that word: L O V E. We begin by trying to do the loving thing. Scripture teaches this. Jesus modeled this. But often need some support that will help us determine what the loving thing is! So, we have some helps.

*We have the commandments of God.* Deciding what the loving thing is doesn't mean we throw out God's commandments! For instance, the Ten Commandments give us a pretty good idea of what it means to love God (the first five commands) and what it means to love our neighbor (the second 5 commands). In most situations, the Ten Commandments are a reliable guide to show us what the loving thing is.

*We have God's people of the past to help us discern between right and wrong.* We're not the first generation to struggle with good and evil. We'd be fools to ignore what our Jewish and Christian ancestors learned about doing right and doing the will of God. This is why *the Bible* is so important: it shows us how for 3500 years Israel and the early Church struggled to make moral decisions in line with God's will. We can learn from their experiences!

Someone has pointed out that throughout the Bible there are certain things that are *always* regarded as sinful acts of disobedience against God. Among these are: injustice to the poor and oppressed, bribery in the courts, special privileges for the rich and for rulers, sexual immoralities of all varieties, idolatry (worshiping things), deceitful behavior, and superficial worship (divorced from honest living). In *every* generation, God is *always* opposed to these things.

Sometimes the Bible is clearer about what's right and what's wrong than we make it out to be! The problem may be, *we just don't want to do* what the Bible says. So, the experience of God's people in the past can help us discern right from wrong.

*We also can get help from the present community of faith – the Christian fellowship.* The Church can be a place where we help one another work through the moral questions and dilemmas we face - through praying together, sharing in small groups, youth groups, Sunday School classes, men's and women's fellowships, etc.

Small groups in the church can be a good way of helping us to share our struggles with one another as we try to do right and try to do God's will. For instance, parent's groups, where parents can work through some of the issues of parenting. In one church we had a small group for parents who had adopted children. Men' groups, where men can share the struggles and temptations that men face. Groups where people in similar kinds of jobs can help each other work through the moral dilemmas of the work place. I believe there's more of a chance that God's will can be discovered wrestling with issues *together* than just trying to make moral decisions *on our own*.

*Then, we have the Holy Spirit living in us (if Christians) to help guide us morally.* One of the things Jesus promised when the Holy Spirit would come is that He would lead us into the truth – or into right paths. John 16:13, Jesus says, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth”. “Truth” in the Bible is not just facts/intellectual truth – but *the right way of living, doing* the right thing! God's Spirit is present with us and in us to teach us and to guide us as we face difficult moral choices.

To summarize what I've been saying, strive to do the loving thing.....but let the commandments, the wisdom gained from God's people of the past (Bible).....let our brothers and sisters in Christ assist us in making right moral choices, and trust God's Spirit to guide us.

One little addendum before I finish! Isn't it true, often the problem isn't trying to know what's right. It's *doing* what's right. Sometimes we know what the right to do is. We just choose not to do it. Or, we *want* to do what's right, but we're weak and sinful, and fail to do it. Every one of us, at times, has chosen the wrong path, made foolish moral choices. Every one of us has our weaknesses and vulnerable points.

But God loves us even when we fail. And when we repent, and turn, and try to do the right thing, God forgives us, picks us up, dusts us off, and gives us another chance. Hallelujah! Thank you Jesus for that!

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