

# The Christian and Ethics

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We are living today in an era of moral corruption. This is characteristic of the worldly in just about any age. Unfortunately, in our time religious people are often just as avid in their defense of immoral action as is the world. Such is the case with most protestant denominations, and with the Catholic Church. Whenever such attitudes exist in a culture, they may have an unfortunate effect upon the Lord's people as well. This was true with Israel, who adopted the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites when they possessed the land of promise. It was true of the Corinthians, whose tolerance of sexual sin (cf. 1 Corinthians 5) was characteristic of that city's pagan culture. It is true among some in the church today. Many Christians struggle with questions of right or wrong, as a consequence of a society largely consisting of *"those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!"* (Isaiah 5:20).

In light of this struggle, a discussion of ethical standards and questions, and the Christian's proper response to such questions, is appropriate and needed.

## The Standards of Men

From the very beginning, men have struggled with the question of right and wrong. After hearing God's instructions to not eat of the tree of knowledge lest you die, Eve was told by Satan, *"You will not surely die. <sup>5</sup> For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* (Genesis 3:4<sup>b</sup>-5). This is the first example of one calling evil good. Eve was taken in by his deception, and sin entered the world.

During the time of the judges, Israel often engaged in corrupt activities, as they were left to their own devices. It is recorded in Judges 17:6, during one such descent into idolatry, that *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."*

In fact, much of human history is taken up in men doing what is right in their own eyes. A study of ethics, (a system of moral principles; ... the rightness or wrongness of actions, *Dictionary.com*), is dominated by the various philosophical schools of thought originating in the minds of men.

The Bible claims it is folly to allow man's philosophical efforts to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action. The writer of Proverbs states, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death"* (Proverbs 14:12). It is not possible for a man with his limited discernment and experience to correctly decide what is good and what is evil. As he contemplated the sad state of his corrupt people, the prophet Jeremiah declared, *"O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps"* (Jeremiah 10:23). Consider the following efforts of man to determine right from wrong:

**The Greeks.** Paul preached on Mars Hill to the Athenians, who *"spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing"* (Acts 17:21). Among those men, *"Epicurean and Stoic philosophers"* were singled out as individuals who Paul encountered (cf. vs. 18).

*Epicureans* lived by what can only be described as a hedonistic ethical philosophy. It was their belief that true pleasure coincided with virtue. While they decried excess because of its negative consequences, and accepted the legitimacy of some unpleasant circumstances if they led to a better life in the future, their main goal was the pursuit of pleasure. Obviously, to individuals such as this, Paul's conclusion that God "*commands all men everywhere to repent*" (vs. 30), would have sounded foolish. To them the standard of right and wrong coincided with their own impulses.

The *Stoics*, as the name implies, viewed peace of mind as the greatest virtue. The key in their thinking was the mastery of the will. If you can control your emotions and desires you will have the peace that is necessary for self-fulfillment. While there are certain true concepts found in their idea of the need for self-control (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:25), they distorted the concept. For example, rather than acknowledging the appropriateness of sexual activity within marriage (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:3-5; Hebrews 13:4), they believed that sex and sexual desire were among the greatest impediments to peace, and to be avoided. As Paul stated concerning self-denial for self-denial's sake, "*These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh*" (Colossians 2:23).

**Modern Day Ethical Philosophies.** Men continue to formulate ethical philosophies. One such philosophy is known as *consequentialism*. This is the belief that something is virtuous if the consequence of the action leads to good. Put colloquially, the end justifies the means. This concept has been coined as *Situation Ethics*. By definition, this philosophy is an example of moral relativism. If the consequence of an act is sufficiently positive, lying, stealing and even murder is considered just and good. Of course, the Bible is full of examples of moral absolutes. The list of fleshly lusts in Galatians 5:19-21, for example, is always characterized as unacceptable. "*...Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*" (vs. 21).

As men have progressed to a postmodern age, ethical philosophies have evolved. Consider the following quote from the *Wikipedia* article on Ethics:

Zygmunt Bauman says Postmodernity is best described as Modernity without illusion. The illusion being the belief that humanity can be repaired by some ethic principle. Postmodernity can be seen in this light as accepting the messy nature of humanity as unchangeable.

In effect, the Postmodernist believes that the very idea of ethics is in itself absurd. He is convinced that the idea of absolute right and wrong is misguided. Instead, it is simply a practical question of how much social resistance a particular act may generate. As a result, what is accepted is really a matter of who is in power, without any intrinsic moral "rightness" or "wrongness" being involved.

In this paradigm, abortion becomes "right" because it is lawful. Such will be so with euthanasia, homosexual marriage and marijuana use as well, as soon as society uniformly adopts and allows their practice. In contrast, pedophilia and slavery are wrong because society

will not accept those practices, not because of any absolute standard. This is why our culture, within a single generation, can go from describing homosexual desire as a mental disorder, to it being an alternate behavior, to it being an equally legitimate and normal expression of sexuality.

The Postmodern view of ethics has completely changed the cultural landscape of our nation. Ethics have changed to the point that the traditional Christian view of “righteousness” is not only held by a minority, but is widely criticized by the majority as socially destructive. Jesus was right when he told His disciples, *“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you”* (John 15:18-19).

## **The Divine Standard**

In March of 1994, Bob Dickey wrote in *Guardian of Truth* magazine:

The greatest peril of modern man is his rejection of absolute authority. The rejection of authority, and the failure to respect it, is the primary cause for the problems being experienced in our homes, schools, and in our nation. In the spiritual realm, it is the source of disaster for multitudes. (page 6)

His observation is accurate. It rightly identifies why so many religious groups are mere shadows of the true faith, and why the ethics of our society have been turned topsy-turvy in only a few decades. In contrast to the world, the faithful Christian acknowledges the existence of God, and that God has revealed His will to man in the form of inspired scripture. The text of Romans 3:4, *“...let God be true but every man a liar”*, if accepted, solves the ethical conundrums and contradictions that plague men today.

Men debate the morality of sexual promiscuity and alternate sexual orientations—God’s word has the answers to the issues. Men wonder at the ethicality of abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty and embryonic stem cell research—God has spoken in principle to solve these difficult puzzles. Men debate the wisdom of corporal punishment—The Bible clearly settles the matter. The Bible has answers to questions concerning war, slavery, deceit, drug use and legalization, self-defense, civil responsibility, political involvement and the myriad moral questions that flummox the uninformed. Not all of the questions are easily answered. Not all of the answers are easily found. But the answers are there, and available to the man who will heed the admonition of Paul, *“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you”* (1 Timothy 4:16).

The man of God must be careful. He must be *“rightly dividing the word of truth”* (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). It is possible to allow cultural bias or other prejudices to make people unstable, and *“twist”* the scriptures *“to their own destruction”* (cf. 2 Peter 2:16). Each Christian must accept the reality of Bible inspiration, and endeavor to understand the Holy Spirit’s work, as it was intended to be understood. Only then can he say with the Psalmist, *“Concerning the works of men, By the word of Your lips, I have kept away from the paths of the destroyer. <sup>5</sup> Uphold my steps in Your paths, That my footsteps may not slip”* (Psalm 17:4-5).