

HOW TO TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 25, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

This is a time when those who demonstrate for world-wide peace often engage in violence. It is a time when people are saying there is no universal right and wrong, but that it varies with the circumstances. It is a time when people feel that it is justifiable to set principles aside if it is financially profitable to do so. It is a time when people seem to be pleasure-mad, constantly seeking some form of entertainment rather than some worthwhile work. It is a time when drunkenness and excess are called gracious living, while cheating and deception have come to be regarded as smart maneuvering. It is a time when moral and ethical values are blurred and confused.

It is a time when the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah are especially appropriate: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter." (Isa. 5:20). In this topsy-turvy age, is it possible to tell right from wrong?

Conscience As Guide

In matters where doubts exist as to right and wrong, many suggest, "Let your conscience be your guide." This would be a good rule if the conscience were infallible--which it is not. In his first letter to Timothy the apostle Paul wrote, "... though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief ..." Two verses later he spoke of "sinners of whom I am chief ..." (I Tim. 1:13-15). Yet this same great man could also say, as he stood before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience until this day." (Acts 23:1). Here was a man who was uniquely conscientious, yet he was in gross error as to what was right at certain times in his life.

Paul also taught us that the conscience can be weak (I Cor. 8:7), and that the conscience can be seared. (I Tim. 4:2). He also spoke of people who were "past feeling." (Eph. 4:19). Our consciences merely urge us to do right, without telling us what the right is. The training which a person receives determines whether his conscience guides him in the right direction or not. A conscience can be misguided, or a conscience can be carefully trained to know true values. In spite of the fallible nature of conscience, it serves a worthy purpose, for we find the apostle Paul saying, "... I exercise myself to have a conscience void of offense toward God and men always." (Acts 24:16).

The Inspired Word of God

The answer to what is right and wrong lies in the inspired word of God, the Bible. In the 119th Psalm, the longest of all the Psalms, the 105th verse reads, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and light unto my path." It is in the 19th Psalm, however, that we find special emphasis upon the meaningfulness of the inspired scriptures:

The law of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul:
The testimony of Jehovah is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of Jehovah are right, rejoicing the heart:
The commandment of Jehovah is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of Jehovah is clean, enduring forever:
The ordinances of Jehovah are true, and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the droppings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is thy servant warned:
In keeping them there is great reward.
Who can discern his errors?
Clear thou me from hidden thoughts.
Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sin;
Let them not have dominion over me:
Then shall I be upright,
And I shall be clear from great transgressions.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in thy sight,
O Jehovah, my rock, and my redeemer." (Ps. 19:7-14).

As we read this tribute to the law of Jehovah, the testimony of Jehovah, the precepts of Jehovah, the commandments of Jehovah, and the ordinances of Jehovah we are led to think back to the Ten Commandments as the heart of God's Old Testament law. We also think

of the teachings of Christ in the great Sermon on the Mount which we find in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. To these words we would add Paul's statement to Timothy, "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." (II Tim. 3:16-17).

Then there are also these words in Deut. 4:2, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you." In the New Testament there are these additional words, "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." (II John 9). We concluded, then, that the answer to what is right and what is wrong lies in the inspired word of God--the Bible. It is imperative, therefore, that we take time to read and study this infallible guide, so that we may know its principles and so that they may be so real in our hearts that they guide our every decision.

Ignorant and Unconcerned

Unfortunately, many are ignorant of the word of God and many are unconcerned about the teachings found in the word of God. Paul wrote, "... being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness unto every one that believeth." (Rom. 10:3-4). We also remember these words in the Old Testament book of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25). This has a surprisingly modern ring to it, does it not?

When every man becomes a law unto himself there can be no universal righteousness because there is no standard code, no pattern of right, no accepted measurement. The expression "taking the law into their own hands" simply means a denial of the existing law. Further, the man who says, "I knew the Bible says thus and so, but I think ..." is taking the law of God into his own hands. When man disregards either God's law or the laws of the land, he is destroying the only stable basis on which society can exist. He is moving toward the law of the jungle and utter chaos. Some laws are unjust and need to be changed. We must make no mistake about that. However, the principle of obedience to properly constituted law is a principle which is absolutely essential if civilization is to continue. Let us change the laws that need to be changed in the legally approved manner, but let us respect law for our own survival sake.

Six Ways

For many people, however, the principles of the scriptures are not enough. Rather than take the time to learn these principles and then thoughtfully to work out applications to specific situations, they want a ready-made answer for every situation in which they find themselves. Some years ago Harry Emerson Fosdick stated their case, "It is not always easy to tell the difference between right and wrong ... Behind a great deal of our modern immoralism, is not so much downright badness as sincere confusion as to what is right. In many a dubious situation how we wish that someone would tell us that! ... Old customs and old codes of behavior in family life or in relationships between men and women ... undertake to tell us how to act, but the circumstances in which those codes and customs are supposed to function are radically different from the circumstances in which they first emerged, so that although their basic principles may be valid their applications are endlessly perplexing. In consequence, old patterns of behavior smash up and old prescriptions for right and wrong do not seem pertinent, and every day human beings, who always like to have their roadways plainly marked, go astray, not because they deliberately want to but because they are honestly confused about which the right road is."

Fosdick was describing those situations that I like to call "the gray areas." There are some areas of conduct that are so black that no one needs to tell us that they are utterly wrong; there are other areas that are so white that no one needs to tell us that they are completely right. The problem areas are in between where the white shades into the black leaving a gray area which may be right or may be wrong. It is in this area where we sometimes find it difficult to apply the principles of God's word.

In life's gray areas a few suggestions may be of help. Harry Emerson Fosdick suggested some helpful tests by which to evaluate behavior. Test number one is the test of common sense. Suppose that someone should challenge you to a duel. What would you say? I would advise you to say, "Don't be silly. Dueling never settled anything really. For two men to go to some secluded spot, stand back to back, then at a given signal walk thirty paces, wheel and fire a pistol at each other is utterly ridiculous. There are some things that we simply know are foolish by our own sound reasoning. I would also use another example that is a bit more current. Suppose someone should offer you one of the modern drugs, such as LSD, or amphetamine pills of one kind or another, or marijuana, or some other drug. The answer ought to be the same. "Don't be silly." Knowing that these drugs can be devastating at worst and at best somewhat harmful, we ought to consider their use foolish. The right-thinking person does not flirt with disaster, especially when there is nothing whatever to be gained.

Test number two is the test of sportsmanship or fairness. We must not allow to ourselves special favors which we do not allow to others. The rules of the game apply to all alike. In every situation we should ask ourselves of our own conduct. "If everyone acted on the same principle, would it be good for all?" There is no more profound guideline for behavior than to consider what we are doing as if it were a principle for all men to live by. Would it be acceptable for mankind? If not, then it is not acceptable for us. Essentially, this

is the Golden Rule which Christ taught his disciples, "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:12).

Test number three is the test of the best self. There are many selves in each of us: a careless self, a greedy self, a passionate self, and on and on. Then, there is also an inner self that is akin to God. Let us make sure that this higher self is the real determiner of our acts.

Test number four is the test of publicity. In thinking of a certain action we ought to ask ourselves, "What if everybody should know about it?" When something has to be done in secrecy and with furtiveness, it is a pretty obvious indication that it ought not to be done at all. The noted preacher, Phillips Brooks, of Boston, once said, "To keep clear of concealment, to keep clear of the need of concealment, to do nothing which he might not do out on the middle of Boston Common at noonday--I cannot say how more and more that seems to me to be the glory of a young man's life. It is an awful hour when the first necessity of hiding any thing comes. The whole life is different henceforth."

Test number five is the test of our most admired friend. We need to weigh our decisions in the light of the attitude which our most admired friend would have toward them. Sometimes in a borderline case, we can see conduct to be wrong if we think of it in terms of the attitude that some highly regarded friend would have toward it. This is helpful. Some of us do not like loud, boisterous, lewd, and suggestive music, because we have known great music. Some of us do not like the carnivals that come with the state fair each year because we have known finer things such as the quiet beauty of the forest or the gentle colors of a flower garden. Some of us do not like cheap promiscuous sexuality because we have known pure and lasting love in a happy, meaningful marriage relationship. It is when we compare some of the current ideas and activities with the truly beautiful and valuable that we can see that they are shoddy, cheap and unworthy.

Test number six is the test of foresight. We need to ask, where is this course of behavior coming out?" We need to take the long look. No activity is to be judged only by its beginning. When we pick up one end of a stick we inevitably pick up the other also. When we start down one end of a road, we also involve ourselves with the other end as well. These six tests help us to apply the basic principles of God and guide us to the making of better choices in the very difficult areas of decision.

Conclusion

If you would know how to determine what is good and what is evil, Study the scriptures. This means attendance at Bible classes, it means listening to sermons, and it also means quiet hours with an open Bible in the privacy of one's home. However, it is not enough simply to know the scriptures and the guidelines which God's word gives us. It is enough only when we follow these guidelines.

Best of all, we have the privilege of knowing Christ and of following in his steps. God did not give us a code-book of concepts which it is difficult for man to grasp. Rather, he gave us a warm, human and yet perfect example of how one should live in this topsy-turvy world. When Jesus walked the earth, things were little different so far as moral and ethical decisions are concerned from the way they are today. All of man's temptations were known then as well as they are now. In a perplexing age, it is wonderful to know that we have an example that is worthy of being followed not just occasionally but at all times and all the way. Christ is our pattern as we seek to tell right from wrong.