



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Considering the Why and How

1 Corinthians 2:6-13

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Are We Asking the Right Question?

I'll begin with some real life situations (though a few details have been altered). None is hypothetical, and I have firsthand knowledge of each.

- A member of a church's youth group was injured in a traffic accident just before time for the Sunday evening service. After the service, several members went to check on him. At the desk granting access to the ER, one was told that only family members were allowed into the care area. Although not a blood relative, she said, "I'm their sister," and was allowed in. Right or wrong?
- A family was preparing to host a special event and wanted the decorations to be just right. They saw an item that would add just the right touch and bought it. But, they left the price tag attached and displayed the item so the tag remained hidden. When the event was over, they returned the item for a full refund. Right or wrong?
- A non-profit agency was exempt from taxes on purchases made for its work. An employee with purchasing privileges bought several items for personal use and reimbursed the agency, saving several dollars in his personal account. Right or wrong?
- A young adult, a relatively new Christian, discovered a glitch in technology that allowed him to freely receive a service for which he was supposed to pay. He called the company who told him that, while they opposed the practice, there was no law against it. He concluded that it was therefore okay and continued receiving the service. Right or wrong?

I ask you to consider these stories, not because I think they represent all of the many issues involved in living out the ethical implications of being holy, but because they deal with the question of integrity, of who we *are*. Are we holy or not? How do we decide? Is there a universal standard, or are we left to the dictates of experience and judgment? That's essentially what I asked on a test I once gave to students I was teaching in a Christian high school. Is morality absolute or relative? Why? Here is one student's answer.

I do not think that there can be an absolute standard. I believe morality is relative. Absolute means that whatever the standard is, that's what you do and the standard will always be right. Relative has to do with subjective ethics. The standard is within the person or group. . . . Not everyone can agree on the same standards, so therefore, morality is relative.

Both the case studies and the test answer point to a question that is often left unasked. Erwin Lutzer stated it well: "We must be willing to set aside temporarily the questions of what actions

are right or wrong to focus on a more basic question: what *makes* an action right or wrong?"¹ That is the question at issue in today's study.

True, But Incomplete

Many answer, "What makes an action right or wrong?" by asking, "What does the Bible say?" I don't think that answer is wrong, but I do think it requires some unpacking.

First, if we are talking about things of substance with those we meet, we know many do not accept the Bible as the final authority. Some reject it outright. Some have accepted the commonly affirmed premise that the idea of an absolute standard is antiquated. Others accept the concept of a standard, but are not convinced that Bible writings from long ago and a different world can speak to modern issues. Further complicating things is that some fail to distinguish between great principles that never change and applications of principles that can (and do).²

Second, what do we do about things the Bible does not explicitly mention? Paul wrote on parchment, not a computer. His was a world without highway laws or wire transfers. He never had to decide whether he would voluntarily pay state tax to an online vendor that was not yet prepared to charge it with each purchase (a situation we Tennesseans have been facing the last few years). The Bible's teaching does apply to contemporary circumstances, but when we say, "the Bible says so," do we understand how its words from thousands of years ago in a very different world apply? Do we do the committed study and seek the wisdom we need to properly apply what we learn in its pages? Have we taken the time to think through those questions? Have we understood that we will not get a hearing with some unless we are willing to talk about them? Do we see that the reason some did what they did in the case studies cited above may have resulted from not having thinking about them?

Third, what do we understand about the *nature* of the Bible's teaching? Is it just a rule book we use like a baseball umpire does to determine whether a ball is fair or foul or whether interference has occurred on the base paths? Or is it the expression of the nature and will of its Author which is sometimes revealed in specific commands? How we respond to those questions will make a big difference in how we apply the Bible's teachings to our various situations and with whether we come to understand why some things are wrong that do not immediately strike us that way. It will also affect our attitude and motivation for obeying.

In summary, before we say "the Bible says so," we should ask *why* it has the right to say it and *how* it says it. Fortunately, it also teaches what we need to prepare to give an answer to these questions (see 1 Pet. 3:15).

¹ Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 14.

² That confusion is evident in the test answer cited above. In truth, there are great principles of right and wrong that are absolute which have relative applications. To illustrate, a young lady I knew in college was part of a group planning a trip abroad. She told me that the girls were told not to wear certain colors in some places they would visit. While acceptable here, in those places the colors communicated that they had compromised their moral character. Or, consider how women reporters from the West wear head coverings in other parts of the world when they interview people who live there; to not do so in those cultures is shameful. Or, think of politicians who have created controversy when visiting other countries by using a gesture that was innocent, or even positive at home, but vulgar or insulting in the country they were visiting. In each case, there is an universal principle that is generally accepted (dress that reflects high moral standards, communication that is good and wholesome), but the *application* of it varies from place to place.

Grounded in God's Wisdom

The Bible writers believed that what they wrote had been revealed by God. One of the most helpful passages in this regard is 1 Corinthians 2:6-13 where Paul made four points.

- Paul believed he possessed wisdom that originated in God's mind (see Gal. 1:10-12).
- He believed he could now know its formerly secret content because God had revealed it.
- Paul understood that God's understanding far exceeds our own (see Rom. 11:33-36), but he was nevertheless convinced that the wisdom given to him had been revealed in understandable words.
- Paul said he was passing on that wisdom to those he taught so that everyone can know the teaching of God's wisdom and what it requires.

This text helps clarify what we should be saying when we say, "the Bible says so." The Bible is the absolute standard because of *whose* nature and mind it reveals. To put it another way, God is not authoritative because his words are in the Bible; the words in the Bible are authoritative because they are God's. To say we accept the Bible's teaching is to say that we accept what God said and believe we can understand it sufficiently to apply it to our lives. Because of that, we believe we can use the Bible's teaching to know what we should and should not do.

The nature of God is therefore at the heart of holiness. Holy living is not based on a list of rules that only apply to the specific things they mention, although God has at times revealed himself and his will through such rules. Nor is it based on arbitrary decisions that might have been different had God been in a different mood the day they were decided. The Bible reveals God's mind. It is his project to tell us what we need to know and do in any and all situations, even some the ancient people would have never imagined could exist. Because he is holy, wise, and loving, we trust his teaching and how it applies and conform our attitudes and behaviors to it. When we approach it that way, we understand that letting the Bible be the standard means more than just "obeying the rules." We can see how they reflect God's nature and how they apply to other, related circumstances.

When We Go Deeper

To see more completely why that matters, I refer you to the case of Sir Thomas More, adviser to Henry VIII. More was caught between his duty to serve the King (Rom. 13:1-7) and remain true to what he knew to be right when the King pressured him to sanction the breaking of his marriage vows. More refused to be swayed by the pressure Henry brought to bear and paid with his life. Only an understanding of holiness that went beyond merely knowing a list of rules could have prepared him to make the right choice. Because he thought more deeply, he stands as a model of integrity.

In light of his example, it is significant that More once said, "The times are never so bad that a good man cannot live in them."³ But, we will stand tall and firm only as we understand the why and how of holiness.

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³ Cited in Peter Kreeft, *Making Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1990), 1.