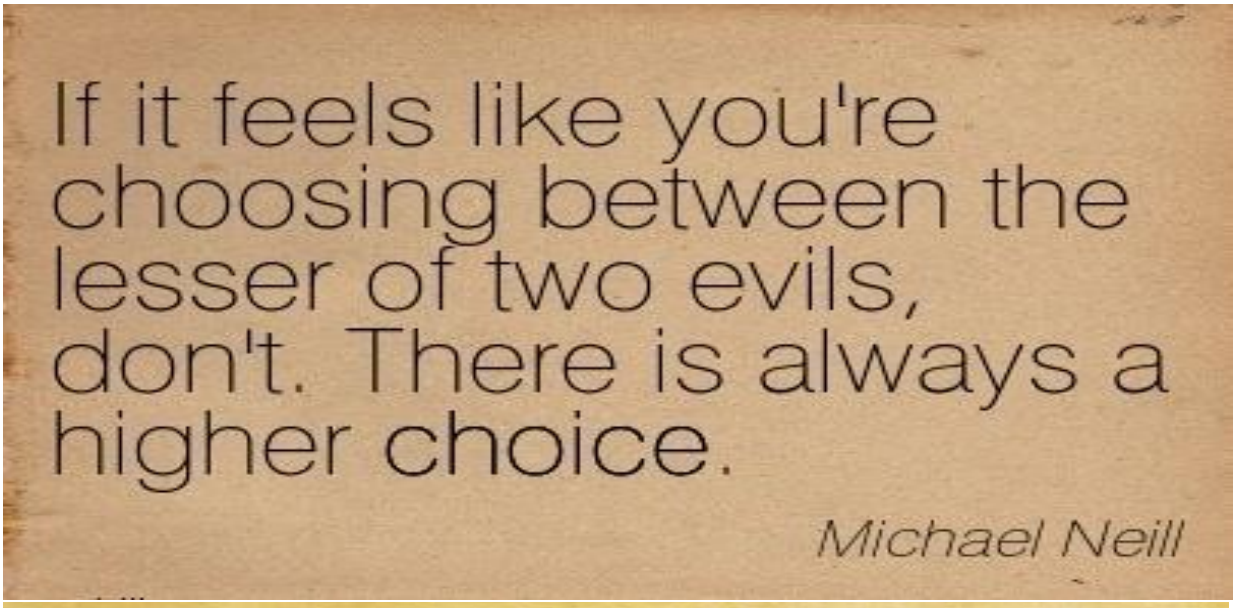
DIFFICULT ✣ DECISIONS

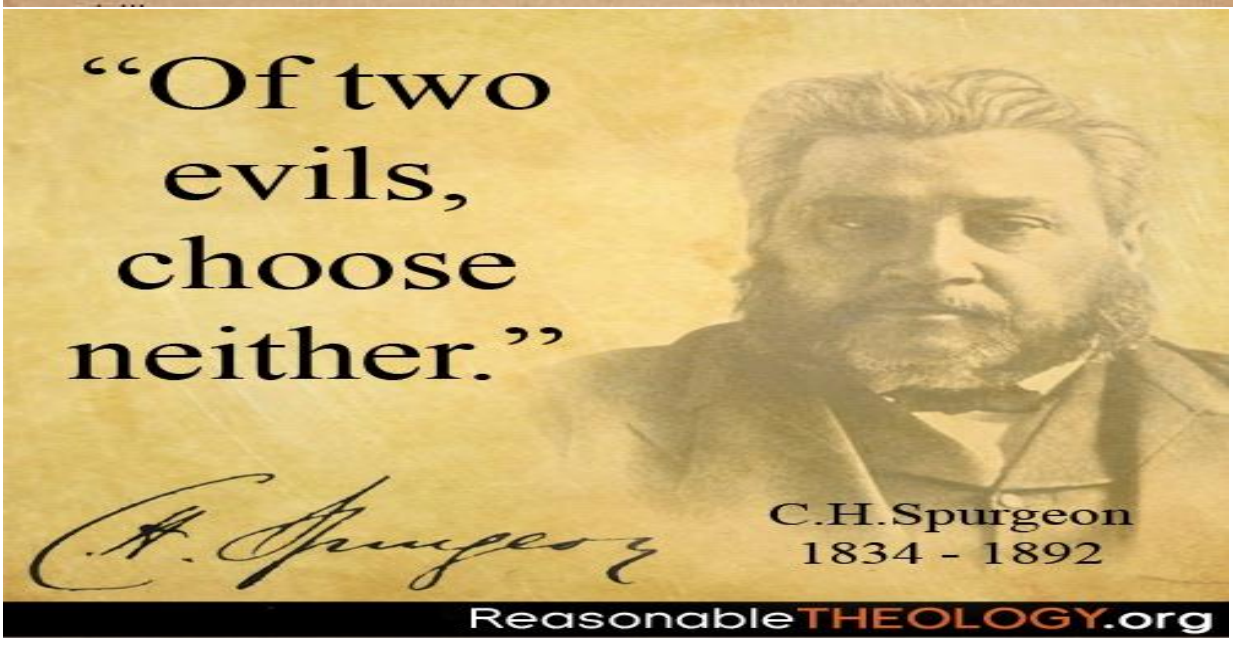
FORMULATIONS OF FACT & FAITH

: RELATIVE CHOICE BETWEEN EVILS &

: POSITIVE CHOICE BETWEEN TRUTHS

By David Lee Burris





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Ethics Course: **A Biblical Theology of Morality**

by Dr. James M. Grier

THE PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

"It appears that there are three major ideas that belong to the discipline of ethics. The first is ethics always include some sort of **theory of obligation**. It is the basis whereby a person determines what he ought to do and what he ought not to do. This theory of conduct enables a person to make moral judgments in decision-making structures.

Secondly, ethics also includes a **theory of value**. It has to answer the question what makes something good. What makes something bad? What kind of values are there in the world? How should these values be used? What is the relationship between these values you hold and the decisions you make?

And thirdly, ethics theory always deals with a **theory of motivation**. What ought to be the self-conscious thoughts that go through a person's mind as he does his duty, as he applies his values to the alternatives that are his in moral decision-making."

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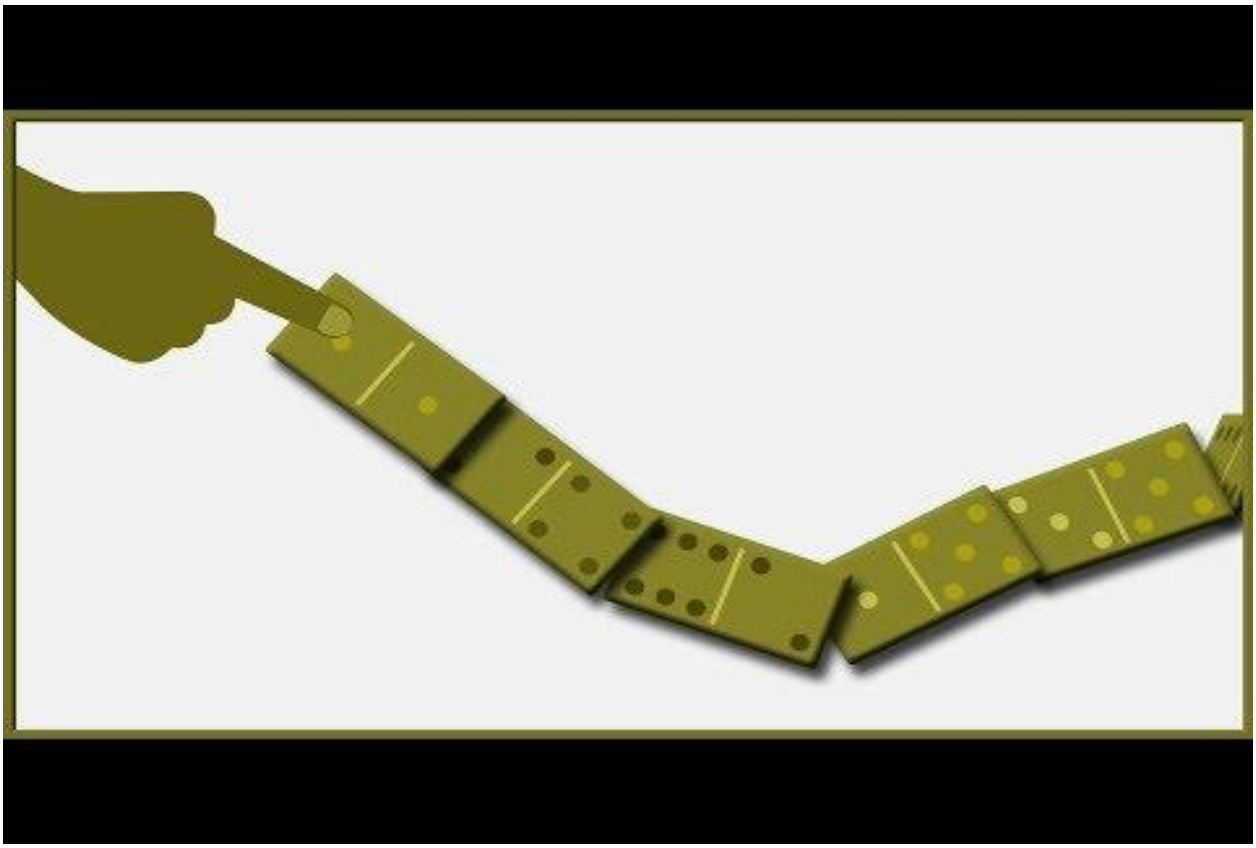
DEONTOLOGICAL & TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

"It appears that there are three major ideas that belong to the discipline of ethics. The first is ethics include some sort of **theory of obligation**. Secondly, ethics also includes a **theory of value.** Thirdly, ethics theory always deals with a **theory of motivation**.

Philosophical Ethics can be organized under one of two headings. First is the Deontology category. It comes from the Greek particle which denotes something that should be done. Deontology is an approach to ethical theory that says the rightness or wrongness of an act is intrinsic to the act and extrinsic to the consequences of the act. An act is right not because it leads to good consequences; an act is right because it is right in itself. That is what deontology would say. An act is wrong not because it leads to bad consequences, but the act is wrong in itself.

The second major category is called Consequential or Teleological Ethics. In this theory of obligation, it's said the consequences of the action determine the rightness or wrongness of the action. That the act itself is never right or wrong. What makes an act right or wrong are the consequences that come from the act."


WHAT IS
CONSEQUENTIALISM?



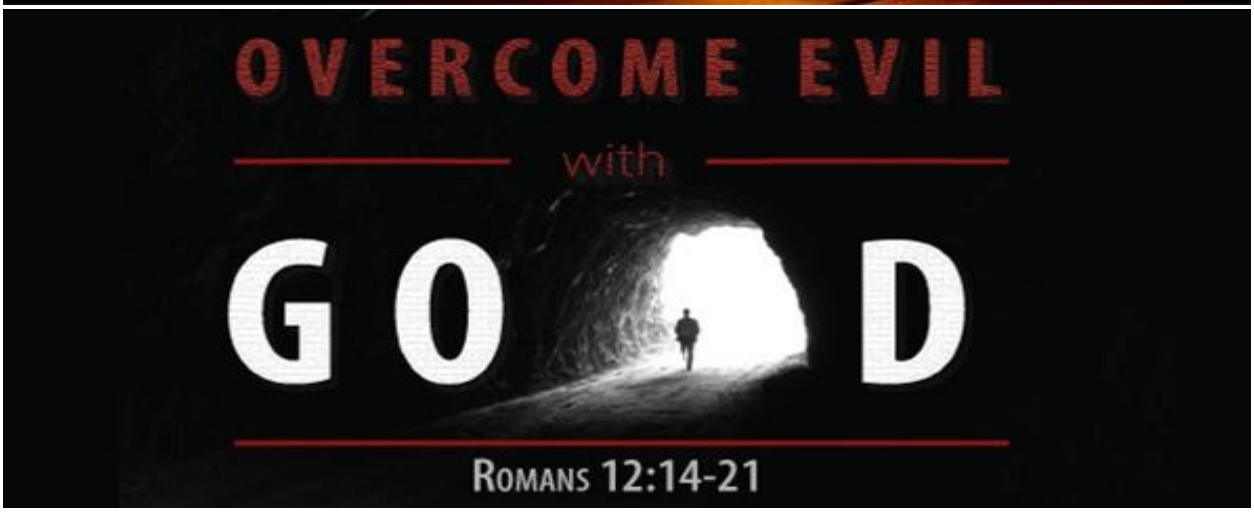
Transactional to Transcendent Religion:

Internalized Belief & Behavioral System

Areopagites' Assumptions	Acts 17	Apostle's Assumptions
Being Religious Is Enough	: 22	This Is Totally Insufficient
God Unknowable By Men	: 23	Our God Is Very Knowable
God In Temples Domestic	: 24	God Created The Cosmos
Worship Offering Transact	: 25	God Gives & Needs Not
Peoples Made Differently	: 26	All Men Made From Adam
When Where We Live Fate	: 26	Space Place Is By Design
God Afar & Man Reaches	: 27	Seekers Finding God Near
God Afar & Man Reaches	: 28	He Sustains His Creation
Humans Childs Of Nature	: 29	We God's Own Offspring
God Seen Carved In Stone	: 29	God's Image Viewed In Us
Ignorance Excuse For Sin	: 30	God Not Now Winking At
Deity Is Morally Indifferent	: 31	He Involves Himself Deep


Do not be overcome by evil, but
overcome evil with good.
Romans 12:21
OVERCOME
EVIL
GOOD


Do Not
BE
ROMANS
BUT
OVERCOME
BY
EVIL
12:21 (ESV)
EVIL WITH
GOOD


OVERCOME EVIL
with
GOOD
ROMANS 12:14-21

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INSTRUMENTAL MEANS TO GOOD GOAL

"It appears that there are three major ideas that belong to the discipline of ethics. The first is ethics include some sort of **theory of obligation**. Secondly, ethics also includes a **theory of value.** Thirdly, ethics theory always deals with a **theory of motivation**.

Philosophical Ethics can be organized under one of two headings. First is the Deontology category.
The second major category is called Consequential or Teleological Ethics.

Extrinsic Values are either components of value or good as a means to an end. An instrumental value evaluates - How productive the thing is? How efficient it is in the production of something? It could be a good means to something what is intrinsically bad, or it could be a good means to that which is neither good or bad. **Beneficial Values** are good means to what is intrinsically good. Contributive Values are component intrinsic and instrumental values to the attainment of "Summum Bonum" or The Highest Good!

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Ethics Course: **A Biblical Theology of Morality**

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NORMATIVE RELIGIOUS THEISTIC ETHICS

"It appears that there are three major ideas that belong to the discipline of ethics. The first is ethics include some sort of **theory of obligation**. Secondly, ethics also includes a **theory of value.** Thirdly, ethics theory always deals with a **theory of motivation**.

Philosophical Ethics can be organized under one of two headings. First is the Deontology category.
The second major category is called Consequential or Teleological Ethics.

Contextualists deny the existence of intrinsic value. They simply assert that all values are instrumental. If there is intrinsic value – instrumentalism and contextualism is rejected. And there is a group of people who would say more than one thing has an intrinsic value and therefore there is a *pluralistic answer* to the question of - What has intrinsic value?

Think about that theologically. That if there's more than one intrinsic value. These values will be in competition to organize the rest of your life, perhaps not. Perhaps there are many intrinsic values taught in Scripture, and there maybe even a **hierarchy** between that."

Moral Decisions In Daily Life

Moral decision making is something every human does on a daily basis, modifying their behavior to obey standards of society which are based upon a shared system of values. In its most simplistic form, moral decision making is done with ethical motives in mind, concerned with the distinction between right and wrong by each individual. Moral decision making models and theories provide specific guides and rules to help individuals unravel their moral deliberations. Two of the most well-known moral decision making models in philosophy are consequentialism and deontological theory, both of which have strengths and weaknesses. The two models do share some commonality but there are many issues at which they stand at opposition. All of this must be taken into consideration before choosing which moral decision making model best fits an individual.

The consequentialist moral decision making theory states that an action is considered morally right provided that the consequences which result are more positive than negative. A good aphorism for describing the backbone of consequentialism is that "the ends justify the means." Provided that a good outcome results from an act, that act is considered morally just. Consequentialism can be agent-neutral or agent-focused and the two approaches are worth discussing to better understand the moral decision making model. Agent-Neutral consequentialism ignores the specific affect an action has for any certain individual and instead focuses on the consequences benefitting all. Agent-Focused consequentialism, on the other hand, is when the results of the moral decision are concentrated on the needs of the decision maker. This means that the moral actor makes their decision so that consequences resulting better themselves and the welfare of those they care about and not just the general welfare of society.
The deontological moral decision making theory is a different form of moral reasoning than consequentialism for a variety of reasons. As opposed to consequentialism, deontological moral theory states that the rightness of an action or decision is not solely dependent upon maximizing the good of society. Instead, deontological theory defines the morally rightness or wrongness of an action from the behavior of the action itself, not the behavior of the outcome. Deontological moral decision making provides distinct guidelines for morally right and wrong behavior for individuals to use when making day to day choices. This deontological moral guide places a higher value on the individual than on maximizing the good for society. In fact, deontology actually has constraints to stop an individual from maximizing the good if it hinders following the moral standards of the guideline. Deontology is more open to interpretation than consequentialism, however, because it remains flexible for self-interpretation.

Consequentialism possesses strengths as a moral model that deontology does not. One of the strongest points in favor of consequentialism is actually another theory which resulted from it known as utilitarianism. Utilitarianism was founded by Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher, who believed that the best moral action would result in the greatest good for the largest amount of people. Following it allows for relaxed tensions in society ensuring that the most people feel pleasure, rather than a large amount of individuals on edge or in pain. However, consequentialism possesses weaknesses in its moral decision making too. Consequentialism causes irresolvable morality dilemmas as it requires correlating principles which cannot be compared against one another on the same scale. A resulting weakness of utilitarianism is that it is so focused on the interest of all that it overlooks the rights of the individual which can lead to injustice. The most unavoidable weakness of consequentialism is that is does not provide any direction to its followers for which actions are right or wrong, morally. The wrongness of the action can only be determined by its consequences and by that time it's too late to change the decision.

Deontological moral theory also possesses its own unique strengths and weaknesses. One of the advantages of deontological morality is that it allows the individual to take into account their families, friends, and personalized plans when making ethical decisions, as opposed to consequentialism which tends to be alienating in its decision making module. By putting more stress on the self-worth and personal capital of the individual deontology results in a less flawed moral theory. Immanuel Kant, a well-known deontological philosopher, and his Kantian ethics are a strength of deontology as well because he stated that it's not the consequences of the actions that are right or wrong but rather the motives of the person doing the action. This forces the agent to take responsibility for all parts of their moral decision making, not only the results. However, the biggest weakness of deontology is that it categorizes actions as right or wrong, black or white, leaving no room for any gray area despite the obvious existence of many moral gray areas. Deontology is also hard to follow because its stringency leaves its followers feeling unguided by their morals which lack prioritizing, ultimately causing confusion.

These are only two moral decision making models in philosophy and neither are necessarily the ideal. It is my belief that the ideal moral decision making process must combine the strengths of consequentialism and deontology while attempting to compensate for their errors.

The best decision making process must involve an individual's own moral beliefs combined with the knowledge that can be gained from studying a large amount of moral theories and opinions. Morals are subjective, meaning that each person or group of people may possess their own set which differs from those of others. This is why the ideal process must be personalized to meet the needs of the individual following it. This compensates for deontology's inadequate claim of unchanging principles known as universal law. However, it should include the aspect of deontology that forces a person to be morally responsible for their own actions as this is its best idea. By forcing an individual to take into account how their decision will affect them and their own rather than society, leads, I believe, to better moral decisions being made. This combination decision making theory will also make use of the principle of utility, the best idea of Jeremy Bentham, which teaches individuals to do the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people. This combined with deontology's focus on the individual's rights dissipates the danger of consequentialism justifying genocide, torture or violence as necessary means to a morally right end.

The ideal moral decision making process is difficult to pinpoint, as morals vary by individual and are subjective to different opinions from one person to the next. However, there are aspects of modern philosophical theories, consequentialism and deontology, which can be studied and used to help create an ideal guideline. Consequentialism is important because it focuses on the results of an action for the good of humanity, something which cannot be overlooked in an increasingly globalized world. Deontology forces the moral agent to take responsibility for their own actions instead of relying on someone else to care, just as important to maintaining moral societal standards. Together the two create checks and balances, which, when combined with an individual's beliefs, allow for moral decision making to occur with limited room for error. – Research Paper

Moral Conflicts: Hierarchical Solutions

IN ANY DISCUSSION of biblical ethics, the question arises as to what type of conduct is pleasing to God when the demands of love and law *seem* to be acutely at variance. The lie of the harlot Rahab is usually given as an example of a sin which was appropriate under the circumstances. Fletcher's ethics is for the most part built on such unusual cases. John Macquarrie notes the fallacy of using the unusual cases as a basis for an ethical theory; he says, "An ethic cannot be built on exceptions. Indeed, hard cases can be recognized only because there is already a tacit assumption of norms." J. P. Mackey fittingly writes, "We all know that there are 'hard cases,' but we must also be aware of the legal adage: Hard cases make bad law."[2]

The mere fact that there are moral conflicts does not prove that situationism is the correct ethical philosophy. As Macquarrie observed, the conflicts remind us that there *are* ethical norms. To assume, as Fletcher does, that situationism solves the problem of conflicts because it is not bound by rules is fallacious.

There are many other moral conflicts which are not so easily resolved. If one holds that there are universals, what happens when they appear to conflict? Broadly, there are two positions (both of which accept moral absolutes) which attempt a solution to these dilemmas. The first of these holds that absolutes can sometimes be intentionally broken without sin; the second holds that absolutes can never be intentionally broken without committing a sin.

HIERARCHICALISM OF THE LESSER EVIL

The term *hierarchicalism* refers to a moral theory which holds that ethical norms exist in such an arrangement that each norm is in itself binding; but when a conflict arises, we are exempt from a lower norm in order that we might fulfill a higher obligation. Thus, while hierarchicalism accepts the existence of universal norms, it recognizes that some are more important than others. And since an individual is exempt from the lower norm in favor of the higher, each norm must be weighed according to some scale of values.

Norman L. Geisler, in his book *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, argues for this position and asserts that it is able to cope with the exceptional cases where ethical principles conflict. Using the illustration of Comdr. Lloyd Bucher who signed false confessions in order to save his crew, Geisler writes:

> According to ethical hierarchicalism, it was right for him to lie (i.e. to intentionally falsify) in order to perform the greater good of saving these many lives. The norm against lying was not destroyed but it was dethroned by a higher obligation. Truth-telling was temporarily suspended but not revoked.

Hierarchicalism does not accept the view that we must sometimes choose the lesser of two evils. When one is faced with a decision where ethical norms conflict, obedience to the higher principle takes precedence over the lower, and therefore no guilt results. As Geisler asks, "Why should a man who chooses the *best* of his available alternatives be held guilty for performing an *evil*, even if it is considered a lesser and forgivable evil?"

Such a solution seems attractive, but it is fraught with numerous difficulties. Geisler is aware of the objections which could be raised and attempts to answer them. First, how can one determine the hierarchy of values? We have already argued that people make ethical decisions on the basis of their value systems; and since little agreement exists as to what is valuable and what is not, there is no consensus in moral matters. Geisler disagrees. He thinks that intuition itself is sufficient to show that the only consistent, ethical positions are variations of a love ethic built upon the intrinsic value of persons. He affirms, "Rather than being vastly or totally different, most ethical creeds are quite similar. And at the core of their similarity is some kind of love norm." Such a statement is defensible only if the content of love is undefined. But if the word is given specific content, radical differences between ethical theories become evident.

Apparently, Geisler himself is aware that he is being too generous in evaluating other ethical theories. He therefore adds, "Even *if* some men or some creeds would not recognize some form of the love principle, nevertheless they *ought* to do so. That is to say, they are morally inconsistent for not believing that they ought to love others." Even if this statement be granted, it would be difficult if not impossible to demonstrate that such an appeal to intuition would be sufficient to build a Christian hierarchical value system. Specifically: Would it be possible to show that adultery is evil, on the basis of intuition? Or even on the basis of what Geisler calls the "value of personhood?" Humanists regard sex as an essentially harmless pleasure which should be regulated only by personal taste and preference. Given a humanistic system of values, there would be no rationale whatever for sexual purity. One could commit adultery and wish that others would too. There would be no contradiction in such a conclusion.

Geisler further maintains that all men know intuitively that it is better to love God than man; and even if they don't believe in God, they still have ultimate values and, "Whenever men have ultimate values in view, then they see (or *ought* to see) that the ultimately valuable is more valuable than what is less than ultimately valuable." Such a remark is, of course, true but trivial. Admittedly, Marx, Nietzsche, Hefner, Mohammed, and Christ ordered their lives according to what they believed to be the ultimately valuable. They also agreed that that which was ultimately valuable was of more value than the less valuable. But this did not mean that they agreed on what is in fact valuable and what is not.

The point is, is man capable of determining what is ultimately valuable on his own? The conflicts between proposed ethical theories—both past and present—suggest that the answer is no. If Christ is right, countless others have been wrong. Those who reject revelation may on occasion adopt some values which are identical to Christian values, but when this occurs it is because the law of God is written on their heart; it is not, as Geisler suggests, because some have worked out a rational system that is more consistent.

Geisler, however, accepts the Scriptures as an authoritative revelation from God and claims that the Scriptures themselves support the hierarchical theory. Christ taught that there were some sins which were greater than others. Standing before Pilate He said, "Therefore, he that delivered me unto thee has the greater sin" (Jn 19:11); He also spoke of the weightier matters of the law. Paul speaks of love as being the *greatest* virtue. There is no doubt that the Scriptures teach that all sins are not equal. Some are more serious than others. But does this support hierarchicalism?

If the term be simply taken to mean that some sins are smaller (or greater) than others, the answer is yes. However, this is not what Geisler means by hierarchicalism; he means that when one is confronted by a choice of evils, and he chooses the lesser evil, he has not done evil at all. He writes that "in hierarchicalism, one is not guilty for breaking a lower norm but has an *exemption* from it in view of the overriding duty to the higher norm." But while the New Testament does teach that some sins are smaller than others, even the small ones are *still sins*. Nowhere is there any indication in the Scriptures that sin has not been committed when a moral law was violated because someone was acting with a higher norm in view.

There are, however, a few illustrations in Scripture which might lend themselves to the view that moral laws are suspended in special circumstances. Geisler cites the story of Abraham and Isaac as a classic example of a conflict of moral principles. Contrary to Kierkegaard, hierarchicalism holds that the moral law forbidding murder was suspended for a higher moral law. But the story of Abraham does not prove the hierarchical position. Admittedly, he did not do the lesser of two evils in his willingness to slay his son, but we must note that God explicitly commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. Christian theology has always held that God has the prerogative to suspend or even revoke a previous law which He has given. If in exceptional cases He wishes to interfere directly, He has that right. Hierarchicalism would hold that *man* has the right to choose which law should be suspended and when. Also, the story itself is not an explicit account of the universal Thou shalt not kill being transcended. Admittedly, Abraham intended to kill Isaac, but God intervened so that the *act* was not carried out. At any rate, the story of Abraham is a special case and can hardly be used as evidence that in present-day experiences moral laws are temporarily suspended because a higher law supersedes them.

Other passages are sometimes given to show that lying is right under certain circumstances. God blessed the Hebrew midwives who evidently lied to the king of Egypt (Ex 1:18-20). But the king apparently accepted their explanation as to why they did not kill the male Hebrew babies. It is probable that the Hebrew women bore children without the aid of midwives; the midwives were telling part of the truth. But even if their reply was totally false, there is no evidence that the lie was approved by God. God blessed the midwives because they feared Him, and not because of their falsification of truth. A similar situation is that of Rahab the harlot who told a lie when she hid the spies. Subsequently, in Scripture she is praised for her *faith* and not the lie which she told (Heb 11:31; Ja 2:25). A study of such passages nowhere indicates that those who lie are not guilty because of some higher law.

Hierarchicalism cannot answer the question of how the hierarchy of values is to be determined. To appeal to intuition is inadequate; an appeal to the Scriptures may aid in establishing some sort of hierarchy among sins and virtues, but the sins remain sins & the virtues remain virtues. There is no evidence that a higher norm makes one exempt from a lower one.

A second problem with hierarchicalism is the question of how a norm can be transcended and still be a universal. Geisler correctly notes that his view will be criticized for wanting to have its cake (of ethical absolutes) and eat it too (i.e., be able to break them for higher norms). His answer in brief is, "When one obeys a higher norm in favor of a lower and opposing one, he is not really breaking the lower one but transcending it. He is not making an exception to the lower norm but getting an exemption from it in view of a superior obligation."[14] The contradiction, then, is presumably solved by substituting the word *transcending* for *breaking* and *exemption* for *exception*.

If a person violates a universal law in favor of a higher law, he is not guilty of a transgression. He has not *broken* a law but *transcended* it; he has not made an *exception*, but rather he has been *exempted* from the universal. But does the substitution of these words solve the dilemma?

Geisler continues his explanation by stating that hierarchicalism holds that the absolutes from God are only absolute in a given context, and therefore the theory is a form of **contextual absolutism**. But if absolutes are only absolutes in certain situations, then of course they are not absolutes. If one can lie or commit adultery without sinning because of an obligation to a higher norm, then clearly these two commandments do not have universal application. To strengthen his arguments, Geisler states that the validity and strength of the moral law is there even when it is being broken, that is, transcended. Yet, if it is there all the time, in what sense is the law not broken if it is not obeyed? **And if one can be exempt from one universal in favor of another, how does such an exemption differ from an exception?** To substitute one set of terms for another hardly solves the problem. Despite the initial plausibility of Geisler's explanation, the charge that hierarchicalism wants to have its cake and eat it too still stands. If one is guilty of violating a universal norm, we must conclude that he has *broken* the universal and has not merely been *exempted* from it.

If we are free to break universal commands because of the demands of higher ones, the responsibility of determining what is moral and what is not rests with man. In this regard there is some similarity between hierarchicalism and situationism. It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the two views are essentially the same. At least on paper the differences are considerable. Situationism has only one ethical norm—love. Hierarchicalism is not based on relativism but has many ethical norms which have *intrinsic* validity. Furthermore, it does not accept what is commonly meant by The end justifies the means, and it is not utilitarian. Geisler writes, "It is not utilitarian *ends* which can justify lying, but hierarchical *norms* can justify it."

But given these differences, if lower principles are to be broken (or transcended) in favor of higher ones, there would be a great similarity between situationism and hierarchicalism in practice. The reasons for certain actions might be different, but in many instances the results would be the same. Every imaginable form of cheating would be good and right, as long as it was done with deference to a higher principle. Students would have a habit of finding such principles rapidly! Since Geisler suggests that "one should always yield to those courses of action which make for better personal relationships," the possibility of a greatly disrupted personal relationship would justify a student's moral actions. If a better (higher) norm were needed, he could appeal to the need for a job in order to live. Surely laws against cheating must be "transcended" for the higher principle of survival. Politicians would be "exempt" from principles of honesty, as long as their party followed the highest principles of the hierarchical arrangement. If they were convinced that their party alone could save the country from certain fate, vote fraud would be legitimate—and moral. All such decisions would not be based on utilitarian ends, but the higher principles of the value of personhood would be the cause for being exempt from the lower norms.

Hierarchicalism attempts to solve the problem of moral conflicts by suggesting that one higher ethical absolute makes an individual exempt from a lower absolute. Its difficulty is that it cannot base its hierarchical arrangement on intuition; nor does such a view find sanction in the Scriptures. It accepts the existence of universal as being only contextually universal and assumes that the responsibility of deciding when and how the commands should be broken (transcended) rests with man. While such a view can theoretically claim to differ from situationism, in actual practice the *method* used to arrive at moral decisions would be similar. The differences between the two views should not bind us to their resemblances; in both cases man decides what is moral and what is not.

UNIVERSAL NORMS

The Bible presents a moral system which has universal validity. This does not mean that moral decisions are always easy to make, since there may be legitimate disagreements as to whether a given act falls under the universal norm. Is a lie merely a false impression? Is gambling stealing? These are legitimate subjects for discussion and even disagreement. But whenever an action clearly falls under a propositional command of Scripture, that command judges the action as moral or immoral *without* exception. It is difficult to predict what a Christian might do if faced with the decision of lying or telling the hiding place of friends when an enemy appears at his door, but several observations are pertinent.

First, the moral laws given in the Scripture have *intrinsic* value. Since the commands are a reflection of God's own nature, any infringement of them constitutes sin. Admittedly, no one keeps the commands perfectly, but the objective standard remains the same. If a lie is told, sin has been committed, regardless of the situation. But since the Scriptures judge morality by intentions, a person would not be guilty of lying if he actually thought he was speaking the truth. For example, to say, "The door is open" when one thought it was, would not be sin, even if the door was actually closed. Similarly, we may actually speak the truth and yet be lying. One might make a false statement intending to deceive, but unknown to the speaker, the statement is true. In this case the speaker has lied, that is, sinned, even though through circumstances unknown to him he happened to speak the truth. Since he *thought* he was lying and *intended* to deceive his listener, he is guilty of violating the the biblical command Thou shalt not bear false witness.

Responsibility is therefore based on knowledge. But the point is that whenever one acts with intentions which are contrary to biblical commands, he has sinned. The "good" intention of trying to protect friends does not erase the immoral act of intentionally telling a lie to deceive an enemy. Of course, if faced with the decision of whether to lie or tell the truth, a Christian might lie (who can tell how anyone would react under such tension?); but if a lie has been told, the Christian must come to the cross for forgiveness.

Second, the Christian contends that if exceptions are made to moral laws, these exceptions must have scriptural authority. Some have erroneously supposed that when Christians approve of killing in war or capital punishment, they are then situationists (or possibly hierarchicalists) who make an exception to the commandment Thou shalt not kill. But such reasoning is incorrect. The Ten Commandments are given in Exodus 20, and in the next chapter *God* makes an exception and gives special instructions as to when capital punishment *is* permissible (Ex 21:12 ff.).

Similarly, the question of war must be settled from the Scriptures. The Christian believes that the only legitimate exceptions to any command must be based on the revealed will of God. If one is convinced the Scriptures teach that capital punishment is to be used by civil leaders and that killing in war is permissible, this is not situation ethics. God is the Legislator and is able to permit exceptions to the rules He has given.

Third, the majority of genuine moral conflicts arise because of previous sinful actions. A man may foolishly vow to kill another man. Now he is forced either to break his promise or become a murderer. In either case he is sinning. Here he must choose between the lesser of two evils. Hopefully, he will choose to break his vow. But he would not have been in this moral dilemma if he had not broken the scriptural instructions regarding vows (Ec 5:5). Having violated one instruction, he became entangled and therefore *had* to sin. In this case two universals were clearly in conflict, but only because one universal had already been broken. Many other similar illustrations could be given where an individual had to sin, but ideally such situations need not occur—and in most cases *would* not occur—if no universals were previously broken.

Fourth, some evils are greater than others. Christians who think that all sins are equal in the sight of God ignore the plain teaching of Scripture. (Reference has already been made to Christ's words about the weightier matters of the law.) Christ clearly stated that there are degrees of anger and corresponding degrees of judgment (Mt 5:21-23). And although Christ taught that looking at a woman to lust was committing adultery, and hating your brother makes you a murderer, **this does not lead us to the conclusion that the thought of the heart is in every respect equal to the act**. Judicially in the sight of God the evil thought must be forgiven just as the actual deed, but in terms of their effects, the two are not equal. Sins of the mind do not affect others unless the *act* is committed. In the acts of murder and adultery, the lives of others are being destroyed and ruined: this is not true if one has murderous or adulterous thoughts.

Therefore, if we are faced with a choice between evils, we should evaluate which one is the lesser evil and choose to do the one that will do the least amount of harm. However, such decisions in which only evil is possible are extremely rare. As previously noted, such entanglements are usually the result of previous sins. In the vast majority of difficult situations, evil is *not* a necessity. But whenever a commandment has been intentionally broken, a sin has been committed.

Fifth, since morality is based on intentions, we are not responsible for fulfilling scriptural obligations if we are incapable of doing so. For example, the Scriptures teach that a man should provide for his family. But what if he should be in an accident and be crippled for life? In such instances he is not to be held morally guilty of breaking God's instructions. This view has further implications. Just as one who is physically unable to fulfill God's obligations is not guilty of breaking God's instructions, likewise those who are morally unable to fulfill the commandments are not guilty. If we refuse to break one of the commandments, we are not responsible for the results.

Sixth, since God is sovereign, He is able to control the consequences. This fact is rejected by situationism and underplayed by hierarchicalism. When Joseph Fletcher was at the Religio-Medical Conference in Chicago on February 9, 1972, he said that situationism is frequently accused of playing God. His response was that it does indeed play God, but he added that the word *God* needed redefining. He said that the traditional, that is, personal God has been dying by inches and is already dead. What remains now is only the God of the gaps.

If situationism or hierarchicalism would be the ethical philosophy of the New Testament, there would be no Christian martyrs. Since both theories permit lying if higher norms or values are at stake, the martyrs would have decided that a lie, that is, denying to be a Christian, is indeed a small price to pay to save a life. The superior duty of faithfulness to the family would vitiate the lower norm of truth-telling. But martyrdom is commended in the New Testament because a martyr has proved that he will not do evil; that is, falsify his true identity that good may come. If he and his friends die, God is in control of such consequences. Daniel did not *pretend* that he did not have faith in God when he was told to stop praying to his God. Yet, in this instance God spared his life by a direct miracle. In an equally miraculous way, the lives of his three friends were spared when they refused to bow to the image. The Christian believes that his responsibility is obedience and that the consequences of moral action are then in the hands of God. If refusing to commit adultery or even telling the truth (if there are no scriptural alternatives) causes others to die, this also is within the providence of God. Surely the God of the Scriptures is not one whose plans for certain individuals are frustrated because someone told the truth. If He wants to spare the lives of some, He has the right; if wicked men kill others, neither He nor those who lived within the commands of Scripture are blameworthy. We play the game; God keeps the score.

Seventh, the Christian considers Christ's obedience to the Father (which included obedience to the moral precepts of the Old Testament) as the ethical ideal. He was obedient unto death and yet did not sin. Earlier in this book we gave evidence to show that Christ was not a situationist (as defined in Fletcherian terms). But a final problem remains. Did He adhere to a hierarchical view of morality and therefore break (transcend) the lower norms in favor of the higher?

Geisler thinks that the life of Christ is the most telling objection to the absolutist's view (i.e., the position adopted in this book). He says that if absolutism would be correct, "it would render the sinlessness of Christ either impossible or meaningless as a paradigm of Christian morality." The logic behind this statement is that if there are certain situations in which sin is inevitable, then surely Christ faced them. If He did not face them, the fact that He did not sin would be quite meaningless; if He did face them, then (according to the absolutist) He was in a position where He had to sin. Geisler sees the solution to this dilemma in hierarchicalism. Since Christ was tempted in all points as we are, He encountered the same tragic situations that we face. But when faced with choices where doing evil (according to the absolutist) was a necessity, He simply chose to "transcend" the lower obligation in favor of the higher. In doing this He would have been "exempt" from the lower norm and hence would still be without sin.

This view of Christ's obedience involves two fallacies. To begin with, there is no scriptural evidence that Christ broke or "transcended" *any* of the commandments. Admittedly, we do not have a record of all of the decisions and activities of Christ's life, but it is somewhat perilous to speculate about what He *must* have done. Nothing should be read into the scriptural record to satisfy a given theory. Since Christ's own testimony was always that of obedience to commandments, it is difficult to suppose that He sometimes "transcended" them for one reason or another (Jn 12:49, 15:10). Since He was tempted as we are, and since He always chose to break the lower norm, it would follow that He frequently disobeyed the basic commandments of Scripture. But if such a position is accepted, it would be necessary to provide at least one or two clear illustrations of His breaking (transcending) a moral absolute. Until such evidence is presented, Christ should not be presented as a hierarchicalist.

The other difficulty with the hierarchical view of Christ's life is that it is based on the assumption that Christ faced situations in which He had to choose between two evils; that is, situations in which according to the absolutist view He *had* to sin. Previously we noted that there are indeed such situations, but only because some other commandment was already broken prior to the situation. But if a commandment is not broken in the first place, one is not forced to choose the lesser of two evils. Furthermore, Christ was not responsible for obligations which could only be fulfilled by breaking moral precepts (cf. point five above).

He was indeed tempted in all points as we are. Satan tried to get Him to respond to basic human weaknesses; He was rejected by His foes and deserted by His followers. He even went through death (which is the dominant theme of Hebrews 2:14-18), but in all of these situations He obeyed the Father perfectly. Since the commands are the will of God, neither Christ nor His followers are forced to break them in order to gain the Father's approval.

Finally, the moral conflicts we face should not be used as evidence that the commands of Scripture are not universals (situationism) nor that they can sometimes be transcended without sin (hierarchicalism). Both of these views are attractive primarily because they claim to find a satisfactory solution to unusual ethical problems. If moral laws are rooted in the nature of God, they are binding for all time. Given the limitations of human knowledge and of human nature, moral failures and conflicts should serve as a reminder that we cannot be acceptable to God in ourselves. Rather than relaxing God's requirements, we must see His demands as having been met in Christ. Certainly, we are able to meet the basic moral requirements outwardly, but since God looks on the heart, such external obedience is not sufficient. For this reason, the Scriptures teach that all men have sinned and come short of God's glory, that is, God's standard. But this fact is not a reason for despair. There is another side to the coin. Those who believe on Christ are credited with His righteousness, and in this way God's requirements can be fully met by us all. "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Co 5:21, ASV).

[*]It has been suggested that Mt 12:5 supports hierarchicalism: "Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?" But the point *of* the passage is simply that God, in the Old Testament, commanded priests to kill animals on the Sabbath (Num 28:8-9). Christ is not suggesting that the priests break one commandment because of another; He is simply asking His critics if they had read what was explicitly commanded in the law. Priests who profaned the Sabbath by killing animals were blameless, because they were doing what God had prescribed.

[**]The fact that God frequently uses an immoral event for His own purposes, does not in any way indicate His approval of that act. God is sovereign, so He can take all acts and use them for good. This is most clearly demonstrated at the cross: those who crucified Christ were guilty of malicious murder; yet that event is the basis for God's grace extended to mankind. It could hardly be argued that those who crucified Christ did not sin because God used the crucifixion to save mankind.

[‡]In divorcing hierarchicalism from utilitarianism, Geisler escapes the difficulty of using consequences to determine morality. However, a hierarchicalist must of necessity calculate results before acting. One would never break a lower norm in favor of a higher unless there was some reason to believe that certain desirable results would follow. Even if norms are broken because of principles rather than consequences, the motive for breaking a commandment is utilitarian, i.e., to achieve greater good. In this sense hierarchicalism and utilitarianism cannot be separated.

[§]This point is frequently stressed by John Warwick Montgomery (cf. *Christianity Today*, July 21, 1971, p. 8). Montgomery rejects the hierarchical position and holds that scriptural commands have universal validity. None can be intentionally broken without committing sin.

Conclusion: Bridging the Gap?

There was a time in American history when the Scriptures were widely regarded as authoritative in matters of religion and morals. Most of the people thought in terms of absolutes; some actions were invariably wrong - others were regarded as right. Those who overstepped the bounds of moral conduct were duly punished. Puritanism, which today has a stigma it does not fully deserve, had strict moral codes which were rigidly enforced. Obviously, there was not always unanimous agreement regarding moral issues, but the primary moral laws were generally accepted. But as religious liberalism began its attack on the Scriptures, and as philosophers rejected the doctrine of a personal God, man became depersonalized; he was regarded simply as a machine, the product of time plus chance.

Joseph Fletcher has attempted to give ethical answers apart from divine revelation. One of the reasons for the success of his writings is that he articulated a viewpoint which had already been widely accepted in practice. The only reason his ethical philosophy has not brought total chaos to the moral scene is that this nation is still living on the Christian legacy it inherited from its more religious founders. Thus, situationism has come to coexist with at least some semblance of absolutes. However, unless there is some mass return to scriptural authority, the future can be predicted with some measure of accuracy. The generations which follow will probably be more consistent than the present generation which has clung to some absolutes but without any justification. Presumably such vestigial moral remains will be gone in the future. Situationism will be consistently applied. That which was formerly classified as good can then be considered evil, previous evil can be regarded as good, everyone will be permitted to do whatever seems right in his own eyes, and chaos will prevail.

Fortunately, a growing number of individuals of all ages have determined not to adopt an ethic based on relativistic human values. Many, like the prophet Daniel, have determined not to defile themselves with the social values of their generation. Deep personal commitment is needed to withstand the pressures of our permissive society, and such commitment is not optional. If the choice is (as it appears to be) between a return to biblical morality or the acceptance of consistent situationism, the people of this nation must make a crucial decision—a decision which cannot be postponed indefinitely.

[*]Of course, some forms of biblical morality are practiced in nonchristian countries. The apostle Paul wrote that those who have not the law but yet do it, show that the law is written in their hearts (Ro 2:15). But in such instances, moral values originate from intuition and are not the product of philosophical demonstration. However, if moral values are derived solely from human reason, even the most basic moral codes—honesty, prohibitions against stealing, murder, etc.—can be rejected as inherently valuable, as Joseph Fletcher gladly ackowledges. Logically such a view leads to chaos. Morality becomes a matter of personal preference.[1]

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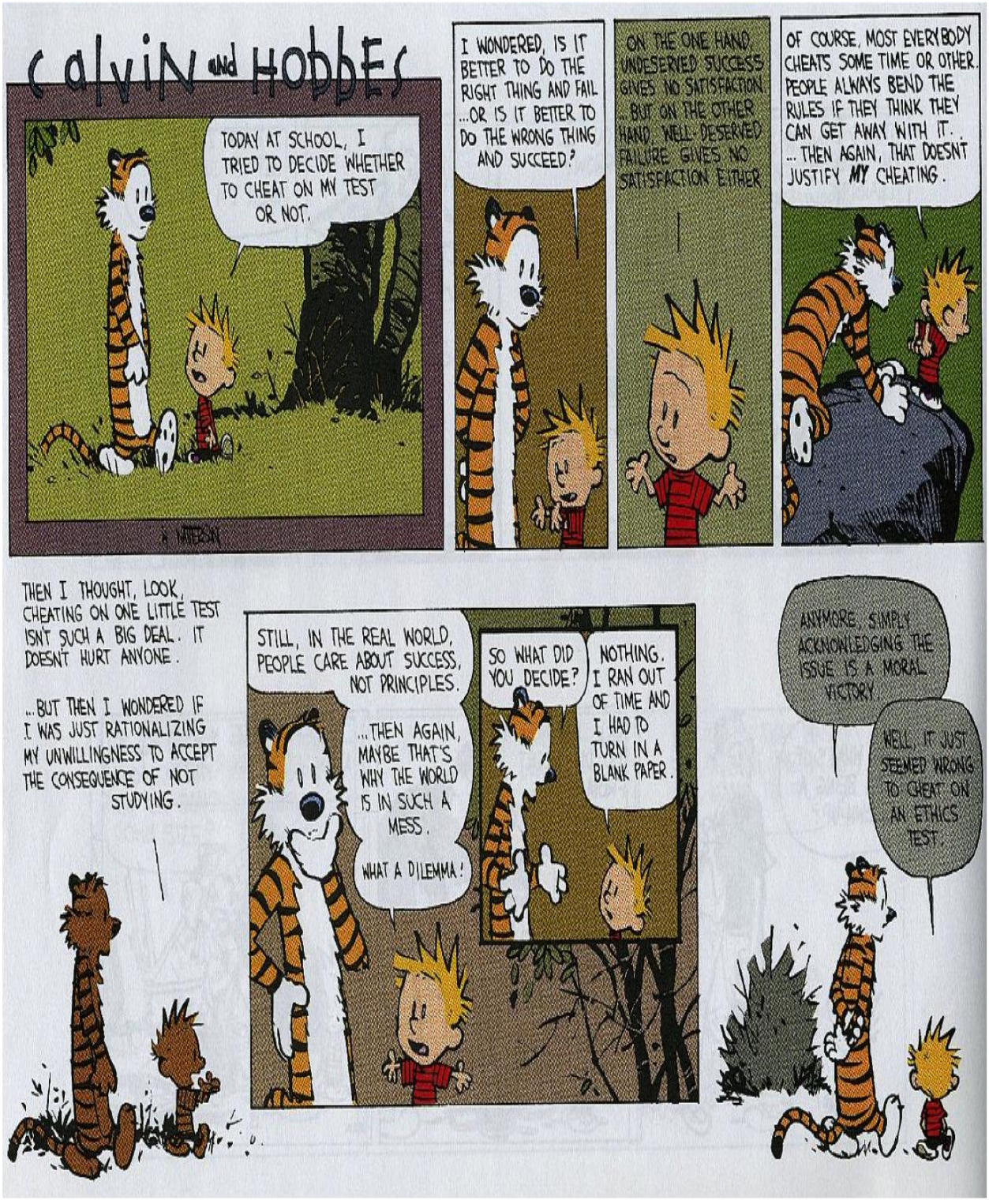
[1] Lutzer, E. W., & Clark, G. H. (1972). *The morality gap: an evangelical response to situation ethics*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

CHARACTER BASED ETHICS



YOUR TEMPERAMENT'S INFLUENCE ON FINDING GOD'S WILL

The most profound human influence on your life, whether you realize it or not, is your inherited temperament. Passed on by your parents through the genes at the time of conception, your temperament produces your spontaneous actions and reactions, affecting your likes and dislikes and even many of your prejudices. Your basic talents as well as weaknesses come from that temperament. In all probability, as much as 25–35 percent of your behavior is the result of the temperament you were born with.

People with different temperaments will process the same information differently. That doesn't mean they'll reach different conclusions because of temperament. Rather their temperaments will cause them to arrive at their conclusions differently. Some people reach decisions almost spontaneously; others agonize over every choice in life whether great or small, never quite certain they're selecting the best options. Both types of people can be very sincere, yet their temperaments make them approach the decision-making process in contrasting ways.

THE FOUR-TEMPERAMENT THEORY

The four-temperament theory is the oldest known theory of human behavior. Although the four were named and briefly delineated by Hippocrates about 400 years before Christ, Solomon described four kinds of people (Prov. 30:11–14) 500 years before that. Two hundred years after Christ, Dr. Galan, a Greek medical doctor, classified the four very carefully into ten strengths and corresponding weaknesses. His basic work has remained relatively unchanged through the centuries.

Few people, however, will fit entirely into one single category. Most people are a blend of two temperaments, one predominant and the other secondary. And while your secondary temperament will affect to some degree your decision-making process, your dominant temperament will influence the choices you make. Attempt to diagnose which of the following temperaments best describes you. Once you've made that determination, we'll examine that temperament's effects on your decisions. Keep in mind that the first two represent extroverts, the third and fourth introverts.

Meet the Sanguine Temperament

Sanguines are the most extroverted of all types; they could even be called super-extroverts. Sanguines are extremely talkative, outgoing, friendly, warm, humorous, and responsive. In fact, they hardly can look total strangers in the eye without responding to them in some way. Sanguines are fun-loving people who enjoy people and live a spontaneous life. Rarely worrying about the future or the past, they extract more pleasure out of today than do any of the other temperaments. Not usually deep thinkers, Sanguines interpret the events of life in the light of the immediate. At times they get into trouble because they rarely anticipate the results of their choices or actions. Their feelings play such a dominant role in everything that they're prone to make emotion-oriented decisions. As a rule of thumb, emotional decisions are almost invariably bad decisions.

Meet the Choleric Temperament

Cholerics are likewise extroverts, but they usually don't generate the decibel levels of the super-extrovert Sanguines. Cholerics are activists, crusaders, doers, pushers, and motivators of other people. Strong-willed, independent, and opinionated, Cholerics tend to be unyielding. Compromise is commonly difficult for them unless it serves their goal-oriented agenda. And they do have goals—for everything from physical fitness to child behavior. They are natural take-over types, who enjoy bossing other people around—whether or not the people like it. Cholerics try never to lose control of a situation, and they thrive on opposition. The most underdeveloped part of their nature is their emotions. Gaining their approval is almost impossible. Achieving goals is an all-consuming passion for Cholerics, and some gain the reputation of using people.

Meet the Melancholy Temperament

The most gifted of all the temperaments are the Melancholics—even though they are the last to appreciate their own gifts. Introverted by nature, they often have a high IQ and a deeply aesthetic nature, enabling them to appreciate the fine arts more than the other temperaments do. Melancholics tend to be moody and are easily discouraged. Born perfectionists, they often unnecessarily disparage themselves for not doing better, when in reality their productivity exceeds that of most other temperaments. They are self-sacrificing, serious, and fearful of failure. No one has a harder time with negativism and criticism (both at themselves and others). Conscientious by nature, they thrive on a worthy challenge or vision for investing their life but rarely can produce it by themselves.

God used more Melancholics in the Bible than all the other temperaments put together. They function best when dedicating themselves to a worthwhile objective greater than themselves. Christianity and its eternal perspective offers them that kind of lifetime challenge.

Meet the Phlegmatic Temperament

Phlegmatics are slow, calm, easygoing, super-quiet introverts. They never get upset, embarrass themselves by "running off at the mouth," or have to apologize for anything they've said. They rarely articulate ideas or feelings unless they are certain they won't offend or hurt another person. Phlegmatics are extremely nice people with pleasant, happy dispositions. Many are very funny because they possess a dry sense of humor. Natural-born diplomats and peacemakers, they are loved by children. They make pleasant, nonthreatening friends—if it doesn't take too much effort to express camaraderie. Two of their chief weaknesses are fear and selfishness, though they manifest these traits so diplomatically that even some of their best friends don't recognize them. Although Phlegmatics are very competent by nature, their activity level is low. Indecisiveness and a tendency to remain a spectator may limit their growth and productivity.

TEMPERAMENT DIFFICULTIES IN FINDING GOD'S WILL

Life is the net result of the choices you've made. If your major life choices have been made on the basis of your natural temperament, your life is probably fouled up. Or like many Christians, you may have followed a little of both—which means you are confronted with doing God's acceptable or good will.

The following analysis will show you the dangers of each temperament. Try to find your predominant temperament in this description.

Sanguines at Decision Time

Sanguines are extremely spontaneous people. In addition, they have sensitive emotions, making them cry easily, love hurriedly, and repent frequently. Their restless nature, causing them to rush headlong into things without weighing the consequences, is not conducive to making deliberate decisions. They respond to the first moving invitation, without evaluating what's involved.

Sanguines need to discipline themselves, particularly when making major decisions. They must avoid snap decisions, savor every carefully laid plan, and trust God. They need to learn not to rush into every decision, even if they feel that decision is God's will. They need to wait, trusting that God will keep the door open as long as it takes for them to become confident that the decision is the right one.

Sanguines are particularly vulnerable when making decisions of the heart because they are so emotional and feeling oriented. It's easy for them to follow the humanistic slogans: "If it feels good, do it" or "If it feels right, it must be right." But feelings can be deceptive. Many Sanguines wouldn't have married whom they did if they'd consulted God's road map and road signs instead of their heart.

Sanguines are "touchers," and this can get them into trouble in our sexually oriented culture. All temperaments need to be very careful to walk in holiness during the decision-making process so they can follow God's leading rather than their glands. Sanguine decision makers should walk slowly during the decision-making process, spend extra time in prayer and Bible study, talk to friends, and wait for the peace that passes all understanding.

Sanguines have amazing potential for serving God if they wait on Him! If you are a Sanguine, learn self-control. Avoid that typical stampede into activities, generated by emotionally made decisions, thus limiting the use of your vessel by God. Listen to God's word to the psalmist, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart" (Ps. 27:14 NKJV).

Cholerics at Decision Time

Frankly, strong-willed Cholerics prefer self-reliance to submissive obedience. In the paraphrased words of the prophet, they need to learn to live not by Choleric might and not by Choleric power—but by God's Spirit.

Although Cholerics are practical and decisive by nature, they need to seek the Lord's leading instead of depending too much on their common sense. They tell me, "I call on God only for the big decisions of life, but I'm capable of making the routine choices by myself." Unfortunately, they interpret big decisions as —courses of action in which they can contribute nothing directly. In other words, they rarely consult God for His leading regarding the direction of their own lives but lean on their own understanding.

Another difficulty relates to Cholerics' strong tendency to be independent and self-sufficient. Consequently, they seldom ask the advice of friends. Having great confidence in their own ability to make proper choices, they rarely ask others who are in a position to be more objective.

When trouble arises, Cholerics tend to lower their heads and bulldoze their way through it. Consequently, instead of recognizing when they have made a mistake and changing course, they plow straight ahead, relying on brute force and durability rather than divine guidance. More than any other temperament, Cholerics will force the square peg into a round hole and then expect God to bless their success.

Unfortunately, Cholerics often enjoy working *for* God more than spending time *with* Him. They need to learn to "delight [themselves] in the LORD" (Ps. 37:4). But if Cholerics learn to submit their wills to God, He can use them powerfully. He can turn their goal-oriented drive into a useful tool for building His kingdom. When their wills are submitted to God, their tenacity and energy become positive forces.

Cholerics need to trust in the Lord, not in their own understanding. Like the Sanguines, they must use times of decision making to read and study the Bible, pray and seek God's leading, consciously surrendering their will to Him. Cholerics can accomplish great things for God *if* they will follow His plan instead of their own, recognizing the principle, "Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it" (Ps. 127:1a KJV).

Melancholics at Decision Time

The moment of decision—all decisions—is traumatic for Melancholics. They vacillate between accepting or rejecting, approving or censuring, agreeing or dissenting. Even when they proceed correctly, they rarely enjoy God's peace. An anxious Christian will always have difficulty finding the will of God. Why? Because anxiety makes it so difficult to read the road signs in the light of God's Word.

Analytical by nature, Melancholics can dissect every aspect of a decision more thoroughly than anyone else. Even when confronted with a worthy goal, they'll occupy themselves with examining not only every roadblock, difficulty, or potential problem they *may* encounter on the journey—but a number of others that will never appear. If Melancholics make an ordinary task impossible by anticipating difficulties, just imagine what they can do to a difficult problem.

Melancholics rarely rush into decisions. Instead they drag them out interminably, and nothing is worse on emotional stability than indecision. It is right and proper to examine the road map and the highway signs, but once you have found them properly lined up, accept that as God's leading and make the decision. You can trust the peace of God, but you can't trust the anxiety of your human spirit.

Melancholics more than any other temperament type are driven to the Word of God and their knees in times of uncertainty or adversity, and that is a safe harbor for any temperament. Thus, decision-making times become for them times of deep spiritual growth. Melancholics also are more likely to ask others for advice, which is extraordinarily helpful if they seek spiritually motivated and informed counselors. They should practice looking to God rather than to the problems conjured up by an analytical and fear-prone mind. Granted, they should be realistic about potential problems, but they shouldn't let anxiety magnify them out of proportion. Remember the spies of Israel? They had "grasshopper vision." Spotting the giants of Canaan, they identified themselves as "grasshoppers in their sight." By contrast, Caleb and Joshua saw the giants but viewed them through the eyes of faith. Instead of grumbling or lamenting, they told the Israelites not to fear because the Lord was with them. Such confidence quickly reduces giants to a manageable size.

Melancholics are perfectionists by nature. If they can't answer all questions perfectly, they tend to become immobilized. They fail to understand that even in leading us to do His perfect will, God requires an element of faith. When the road signs and God's Word agree, they should step out in faith unless God leads in some special way.

Phlegmatics at Decision Time

The practical side of the quiet, gentle Phlegmatic tends to simplify the decision process of life. But once they know God's will, they often lack the faith to step out and do it. They may be blessed with an objectivity about others' problems and be able to render good advice to friends, but an obsessive self-protection and hesitancy to get involved makes them vacillate and worry about consequences almost as much as the Melancholics do.

It always pains me to remind Phlegmatics that they tend to be selfish people—selfish about giving their love, themselves, their possessions, and their service. Thus, every decision to take action is shrouded in the complexity of resistance. Because they tend to be stubborn, the more someone tries to push them, the more they resist. Consequently, they may reject the advice of well-meaning friends.

Phlegmatics will never openly rebel at God's will, but they will refuse to act on it. Unless they're deeply surrendered to doing His will—no matter what the cost—they will decline a positive response more diplomatically than any other temperament.

Phlegmatics' preoccupation with self-protection hinders them from making many decisions.

Phlegmatics need to examine their motives whenever making a decision. If the road signs match up, yet they hesitate, they need to ask, "Am I resisting because I'm afraid of the consequences, or am I protecting myself rather than serving God?" They need to throw off the shell of self-protection, abandon themselves to the will of God, and pray. He hasn't saved any of us to be potted plants but tools in His hand for reaching others.[2]

[2] LaHaye, T. (2011). *Finding the will of god in a crazy, mixed-up world*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

WHERE SOCRATES WENT WRONG

The Difference Between Knowing What Is Right and Doing It

Knowledge of right and wrong makes us accountable for our decisions. A totally ignorant person would have no moral responsibility at all—for good or for ill—like a little child before the use of reason. But is moral knowledge everything? If we were perfectly instructed, with full knowledge of good and evil, would that be enough for us always to choose the good?

Permit me to recap here an old but important philosophical debate. The opinion we just described—that we always choose the good when we know it—was articulated by one of the most eminent philosophers of all time, one whose name is almost synonymous with philosophy itself: Socrates. Socrates, and Plato as well, thought that virtue consisted in knowledge, and that moral faults were the result of ignorance of the good.[1] Whoever knows what is good, Socrates surmised, will do it. Perhaps this sanguine reading of human nature stemmed from a projection of his own goodness onto others. Be that as it may, there is a serious problem with this theory.

Let's go back for a moment to the angel and the devil perched on our shoulders. As good and bad duke it out for our allegiance, we already know what we *ought* to do (represented by the voice of the little angel), and all that remains is for us to *do it* or not. In our moral deliberation, two separate actions are involved. The first is the *judgment* of conscience itself, which evaluates the goodness or malice of a given action, like helping your mother with the dishes (good), or stealing a bicycle (bad). The second act involves not a moral judgment, but a *decision* to obey or disobey what conscience dictates. These two acts are distinct and do not necessarily agree with one another.

No doubt about it: bad conscience leads to bad choices. If we judge incorrectly, our actions will not be truly good. If my conscience mistakenly judges that stealing a bicycle is a morally good thing to do, following it will lead me to do something that is objectively evil. But bad conscience isn't the only source of wrongdoing. Our free choices don't always follow what our consciences command. All of us make some immoral choices, knowing full well that what we are doing is wrong. Otherwise, in a sense, there would be no blameworthiness or praiseworthiness to our actions. Everything would be a result of correct or erroneous moral calculation, and the smarter a person is, the more virtuous he would be.

ARISTOTLE TO THE RESCUE

It was Plato's student, Aristotle, who eventually set things straight. He realized that people are free to embrace or reject the good they know. You and I make good choices and bad choices. After looking at Socrates' doctrine that moral action depends solely on knowledge, Aristotle wrote: "This theory is manifestly at variance with plain facts." It seemed obvious to him that people sometimes choose to do the wrong thing, even though they *know* it is wrong.

Aristotle devised a very helpful outline to understand and categorize people's relationship with moral goodness. He broke states of moral character into four categories. Two of these groups—the "virtuous" and the "vicious"—are either so good or so bad that they experience relatively little interior conflict. Those who possess *virtue* do the right thing spontaneously and happily, whereas the *vicious* (Aristotle also calls them "profligate") do what is evil without thinking twice. The other two groups, to which the vast majority of humanity belongs, he calls the "restrained" and the "unrestrained." The *restrained* know what is good and do it, but only with much huffing and puffing. Their consciences judge rightly, and despite their contrary desires, they choose the good. The *unrestrained* also know what they should do, but they are weaker- willed and give in to their passions rather than obey their consciences. Graphically, these categories could be portrayed as follows:

Like any breakdown of persons into groups, these categories are not absolute, and there is plenty of overlap between them. We can be, for instance, very restrained in certain areas (control of our unruly temper) while unrestrained in others (our weakness for junk food). Still, our relationship to our consciences and their dictates often follows a pattern. We are either very faithful to them, moderately faithful, or simply negligent.

Going back to our example of stealing bicycles, we could say that the virtuous person never really thinks of stealing a bike as an option and doesn't have to struggle. The restrained person may see a beautiful bike, realize how easy it would be to steal it, and even want to steal it, but in the end he follows his right conscience that tells him stealing is wrong. The unrestrained person sees the bike, desires it, wrestles with conscience that is telling him *not* to steal it, but then steals it anyway. The vicious person sees the bike, and, without thinking twice, steals it with no remorse at all.

Clearly the group we would like to belong to is the virtuous, who not only know and do what is right, but do so happily and even "naturally." Such is the nature of virtue: those who possess it not only do good, they do so *spontaneously*, as if by second nature. Forming virtue—good habits—means a sort of reeducation of our hearts and our free will to choose the good. A truly humble person unhesitatingly reacts in a humble way, without having to deliberate and consciously choose the "humble thing to do."

This makes sense when we remember how habits work. Let's take an example from sports. When we train our muscles to work in a certain way by repeating the same movements over and over again, after a while they automatically follow the same pattern. A golf swing is like that. Beginners have to remember countless details: how to position their feet, how to hold the club, to keep their heads down, the proper path for the backswing, to keep their left arms straight, etc. After long hours at the driving range, however, things start to improve. The golfer can relax a little more because his or her body starts naturally following through correctly, and he or she develops a good swing. What once required total concentration and discipline slowly becomes second nature. Our good moral habits—virtues—work in a similar way.

The middle two groups have more difficulty than the virtuous. According to Aristotle, members of both these groups correctly discern right from wrong, so conscience is working. Still, as with the person with the angel and devil on his shoulders, many decisions still entail a struggle. Even the restrained person who eventually does the right thing does so with great expenditure of effort. He does not yield to his evil desires, but they assail him and leave him worn- out. How typical this struggle is for most of us! We strain not only to know what is right but, perhaps even more so, *to do it* once it is clear to us. Most of our moral failures do not proceed from a lack of knowledge, but from a lack of goodwill, self- discipline, and generosity.

The unrestrained person deliberates but ends up doing the wrong thing, and then feels remorse afterward. Sometimes his failures stem from the impetuousness of passion, where he is caught up in the moment and later regrets his conduct. How many times we blurt out hurtful comments in anger, only to regret them once we have calmed down! Other times he succumbs out of weakness of will and simply cannot bring himself to carry out the good he knows he should do. Think especially of the good things we know we should be doing but never get around to because of the effort required.

More than any other group, the unrestrained feel internally divided, since they abandon their good judgment in favor of their lower inclinations.

Despite the conflict involved, these two middle positions share a huge advantage over the person in the grip of vice. Conscience is working! The judgments it emits are correct and the person knows what she should be doing, whether she does it or not. Like a hiker with a good compass, she sees where she has to go, though it may be uphill through thorns and brambles. With God's grace, even the unrestrained have the tools they need to pull themselves out of the moral swamp into which they have stumbled.

Yet the states of self- restraint and unrestraint (some translate Aristotle as saying "continence" and "incontinence") are also more volatile than the states of virtue and vice. It is hard to stay there forever, and we tend to get either better or worse. Therefore, our moral choices in these states are decisive for the future of our moral character. Let me give two examples. The restrained person, if he keeps following his good conscience, will eventually become a virtuous person. The repetition of good actions—acts of charity or generosity or forgiveness—will eventually lead to *habits* of virtue. If you are an impatient person but continually bite your tongue, you learn to be patient. It becomes almost instinctive. When evil desires are resisted and kept in their place, they lose some of their vehemence and gradually become less of a nuisance.

Unfortunately, our bad choices also have consequences. The worst of these is the corruption of conscience. When an unrestrained person continually gives in to wrong actions, he gradually starts to believe that they must not be so wrong after all. If you often criticize people behind their backs even though you know it is wrong, backbiting easily becomes a habit, and gradually your conscience stops registering it. *The old adage says that when we don't live according to what we believe, we end up believing according to the way we live.* This corruption of conscience leads to the horrible situation of no longer discerning right from wrong. Once a person falls into this state of vice, it is very difficult to escape from it, since the one instrument that would have alerted him to the error of his ways—conscience—has become perverted.

REINING IN WILD HORSES

Why all this struggle? If God made us good, why don't we more naturally do what is right? Are we a defective product, tending not to good but to evil? Is all of this somehow God's fault?

There are two important answers to that question. The first refers to man's composite nature of body and soul. If we were angels, things would be relatively simple. Angels don't get tugged in seven different directions at the same time. They are *simple*. Human beings, on the contrary, are anything but simple. Many different forces act within us at any given moment, on many different levels. We have urges, sentiments, passions, intelligence, will, conscience, and plenty of outside influences as well. We are not wholly rational, any more than we are wholly emotional, instinctual, or willful. We are all of these things, and they combine in our decision-making.

The human being is endowed with different faculties, different capabilities of body and spirit. A faculty is simply the capability to carry out a particular type of action. If we observe a car going up a hill, we can be sure that there is a motor inside. Every action requires a capacity, the *power* to bring it about. If you and I can see, it follows that we must have the faculty of sight. If we can think and reason, we must necessarily have the power to think. This power is the faculty of intelligence or reason. We become aware of human faculties by observing the actions people perform.

We can distinguish between what is true and what is false through the use of our intelligence. We can likewise differentiate between various sounds, sights, and tastes—loud and quiet, bright and dim, sweet and salty—by the use of our five external senses. Not all faculties are on the same level. The ability to smell is definitely not as sublime as the ability to reason. Since the human person is a unity,

all our faculties work together and all are important, but they work together according to a certain order or hierarchy. As we have seen, among all our capabilities, the ability to recognize good and evil holds a special importance.

Yet again, conscience doesn't act in a vacuum. Discerning between good and evil, and knowing that we should do good and avoid evil, doesn't mean that all our other appetites and desires simply fall in line. If I am envious of a friend because of her incessant good fortune, it may not be enough just to *know* that I shouldn't feel envious. The bad inclination doesn't go away so easily. All of us recognize in ourselves a whole gamut of urges and appetites that pull us in many directions. Since many of these appetites are irrational, sometimes they pull us in the right direction, but often they require harnessing.

Passions are strong, natural tendencies that drive us toward or away from something. There are bodily passions (sexual desire, appetite, comfort, pleasure) and passions of the spirit (love, ambition, fear, pride, envy, anger). Sometimes they assist us by providing needed drive to accomplish our objectives. Other times they may be unhelpful, or even destructive, and require reining in. Self-mastery—what Aristotle called "self- restraint"—is a necessary condition to grow in virtue. It allows us to discern between appropriate passions and inappropriate ones, to pick and choose which we will follow. Otherwise, conscience is swept away by blind forces that often take us where we ought not go.

In the mastery of reason over instinct, the human being shows himself to be superior to animals and reaches his true dignity. *Channeling* our passions is not the same as *repressing* them, however. To channel means to redirect or to harness. As we have seen, our passions provide energy and drive and shouldn't simply be rejected. If we have a spirited horse, we can let it run wild or lock it up in a barn, but we have a third option as well. We can *harness* it so that it serves our purposes.

An example from the gospel may help here. At one point we find the twelve apostles quarreling about who is the greatest. When Jesus confronts them about this petty argument, he doesn't merely scold them for their small- mindedness and worldly ambition; he *redirects* it. He says: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). In other words, *Your ambition is misdirected, but I don't ask you to repress it, but to seek true greatness rather than a cheap substitute. I will show you where true greatness is to be found*. Harnessing our passions lets them serve us rather than enslave us.

Along with our passions, other forces at work in us are our *feelings* and our *moods*. Like passions, our feelings are irrational and don't always coincide with what we really want. Sometimes I feel like doing what I know I ought to do, but often I don't. Sometimes I wake up in a good mood, ready to conquer the world; other times I have to force myself just to get out of bed in the morning. Feelings are subjective, spontaneous, psychological reactions to stimuli. Since they are reactions, they are blind, passive, and outside our control. We cannot just *decide* to feel happy or sad, excited or down in the dumps. It happens *to us*.

Once again, harnessing is required. Reason must govern feelings. Feelings can be wonderful allies when they happen to coincide with our objectives. But when they conflict with our goals and the directives of our consciences, they need to be kept in their place. Otherwise we end up like dry leaves tossed about by the wind. In order to impose a direction on our lives, passions and feelings need channeling.[3]

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[3] Williams, T. (2008). *Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.

ALTERED STATES

The Wearing Down of Moral Sense

The corruption of conscience is a terrible thing. Sin is a horrible moral evil, but perhaps it is not the worst. The most dangerous crisis that can afflict the human person is the inability to correctly discern between good and evil. Even the worst of sinners has hope as long as conscience is working, since it can lead him to conversion. Forgiveness is always available for those who want it. But what happens when the light of conscience goes out? Who can save us when we no longer perceive the difference between right and wrong?

THE DEADENING OF CONSCIENCE

Conscience will only impose itself for so long. Wars of attrition against conscience sooner or later take their toll and, like a beaten dog, conscience retires whimpering to a corner of our souls. A quotation attributed to the En glish novelist Samuel Butler (1835–1902) sums this up nicely: "Conscience is thoroughly well- bred and soon leaves off talking to those who do not wish to hear it." In other words, after a while not only do we become deaf to the voice of conscience, but for all intents and purposes it ceases to speak. Unfortunately, this is often the case.

At times our moral judgment may be obscured in a particular area, but it may also be deadened in general. Sometimes the moral sense itself—the importance we attach to right and wrong as criteria for our decisions—loses practical force in our lives. We simply *don't care* whether something is right or wrong; we may not even habitually consider the moral character of our conduct. Our concerns become more pragmatic. Our intentions focus on success, on the practical outcome of our actions and whether they afford us pleasure or pain, rather than their relationship with moral truth.

It has been said that the greatest sin of our times is the loss of the sense of sin. Sin seems to have diminished in importance for people of our generation, and we consider it impolite even to speak of it. It happens sometimes in history that the moral conscience of many people becomes seriously clouded, and that seems to be the case today. If we look around at our world, do we not sometimes perceive that modern men and women are threatened by an eclipse of conscience? Many basic moral truths that seemed self- evident to our forebears now are glibly dismissed as antiquated. Sin itself seems thoroughly passé.

Sure, maybe we placed too much stress on sin in the past. Maybe we accentuated the negative and undervalued the positive message of Christianity. Yet some are inclined to replace exaggerated attitudes of the past with new exaggerations. From seeing sin everywhere, they stop recognizing it anywhere. From too much emphasis on the fear of eternal punishment, they pass to preaching a love of God that excludes any punishment whatsoever.

A *sense of sin* does not mean a neurotic fixation on sin, a scrupulous fear of fun, or a cynical distrust of human goodness. It is simply an awareness that sin exists, and that a fundamental part of the Christian life, as Saint Paul writes, means considering ourselves "dead to sin" and not to "allow sin to reign over [our] mortal bodies" (Rom 6:11–12 njb). A *sense of sin* also means the ability to unmask sin in the thousand guises under which it conceals itself. A healthy sense of sin never loses sight of our condition as fallen creatures who, for all our best intentions, are prone to fall. Granted, a sense of sin does not exhaust conscience, since conscience importantly urges us to good and not merely to avoid evil, but a sense of sin most certainly sets at least a minimum boundary for human endeavor. It goes without saying that whoever disregards moral *evil* in his life will care even less for the pursuit of moral *goodness*.

One of the major forces behind a loss of the sense of sin is called *secularism*. Secularism is an over-focusing on the things of this world to the exclusion of eternity. It leads us to ignore transcendent, eternal truths and to give all our attention to the here and now. Like a man walking around staring at his feet, a secularist is unable to lift his gaze to see beyond the present moment to what lies ahead (and above). Thus, a sense of sin is linked to the sense of God. The more aware we are of God's presence, the more attentive we will be to the way we treat him. The less we think of God, the less sin registers with us.

Many, while not denying God outright, live a practical atheism and organize their lives as if God didn't exist. The secularist advocates a humanism devoid of God, centered upon action and production, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and blithely unconcerned with the danger of "losing one's soul." For the secularist, sin has no meaning since God has no meaning. If wrongdoing slows down our enjoyment of the present world, the solution is therapy, not conversion and forgiveness.
In this light, silencing our consciences is no victory. Though we may sometimes wish we could muzzle our consciences so that they would leave us in peace, we do not *really* want this. It is the greatest of tragedies. Though it may grant a temporary respite from the gnawing feeling inside, it also closes us off to the truth.

SIGNS OF THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

But life and death are not the only two options for conscience. Like any instrument, conscience can be sharpened or dulled. It can become more sensitive or coarser. Like a finely-honed knife, a good conscience distinguishes our intentions, motivations, and inmost thoughts. It discerns right from wrong and impels us to do good. A lax conscience, on the other hand, detects only the gravest of faults and often errs in its judgments.

Rarely is conscience corrupted totally, and even more rarely does this happen overnight. The radical shifts between good and bad—*à la* Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—are the stuff of fiction. Conscience usually grows keener or blunter in a progressive way, by incremental and almost imperceptible changes. Moral collapse happens little by little, first by ceding in seemingly unimportant, innocuous matters, later with something slightly more serious ("But no one got hurt!"). Then one day we wake up and find ourselves unrecognizable and morally disfigured.

When examining our consciences, there are a few warning signs that should set off red flares when we detect them. They are the beginning of moral corruption. If we can be aware of these little changes, we can better direct the way our consciences progress. Like early symptoms of a disease, if caught in time, they usually present no difficulty. If we allow them to fester, however, they can grow into a serious problem, and we may no longer have the wherewithal to fight them. Let's look at some of the more common symptoms of deformation of conscience.

SNEAKINESS

The first such symptom is sneakiness. When we begin skulking around, doing things behind people's backs, something is probably wrong. The first question we should ask ourselves is: *What do I have to hide?* If what we are doing is on the up and up, we should have no reason to conceal it.

Here Jesus' words help immensely. He said that a wicked person hates the light, because his deeds are evil and he doesn't want them "to be exposed" (John 3:20). A good person, on the contrary, comes out into the light so that it may clearly be seen that he is acting correctly. A little further along in John's Gospel, as we've seen, Jesus calls the devil "the father of lies" (John 8:44). The devil himself loves sneakiness and avoids the light. What is sneakiness, after all, if not a sort of lie? We try to project an image of ourselves that does not correspond to the truth and to get away with less noble deeds in the shadows.

A person of good conscience isn't two- faced. He or she doesn't act one way in front of people he wants to impress, and another way with a different crowd. This transparency reveals a pure heart and a good conscience. Its absence should trigger a warning bell. We may need to dig deeper and set things straight.

MORAL PARENTHESES

A second early warning of a sick conscience is the presence of *moral parentheses*—pockets of our lives where our moral code changes or disappears altogether. Many of us have areas of our lives where we adhere to a scrupulous moral code, and other areas where laxity reigns. Think of honest family men who, once at work, check their morals at the door and become ruthless in their business practices—as if business ethics were not part of the same moral fabric of their lives. Sometimes the moral inconsistency doesn't reach the extremes, but it is inconsistency nonetheless. Here, too, Jesus offers hard words. He berated the Pharisees for their moral posturing and for straining out gnats and swallowing camels (see Matt. 23:23–24). Jesus hated hypocrisy and praised the pure of heart.

A person who accepts immorality in one area of life sooner or later accepts it everywhere. Morality—the love of goodness and devotion to moral truth—is a *whole*, it cannot be broken into parts. A person willing to compromise in one area of his life, if pushed to it, will also compromise in other areas. We cannot compartmentalize moral goodness.

LOOKING FOR LOOPHOLES

Another sign of the moral slippery slope is a lawyerly way of approaching morality, whereby we jockey for as much ethical wiggle room as possible. When we start looking for moral loopholes, asking ourselves whether such- and- such a deed would really be *all that serious*, we are already moving down a bad road. When we fail to find loopholes, we start creating our own. A person who genuinely loves God and wants to be good doesn't try to walk as close as possible to the border between virtue and sin.

The search for moral loopholes reminds me of Satan's tricky question to Eve in the garden. "Did God really tell you not to eat of *any* tree in the garden?" Of course, Satan knew that God hadn't commanded this (he had only forbidden eating of one tree), but he wanted to get Eve to start questioning God's command rather than accept it with simplicity. After all, what is one tree more or one tree less? When we are most anxious to do our own will, we look for excuses that make it look as if our will coincides with God's. We stretch God's will to make it match our own. But this is not the approach of a truly good conscience. Good conscience wants to know first of all *what God wants*, then adjusts its own plans to fit God's.

It is understandable that a person will look for every possible loophole in the tax code to pay as little as possible. But a person of good conscience doesn't want to squirm out of moral obligations; he wants to fulfill them with as much love and perfection as possible. Again, it goes back to our understanding of morality itself as *a good thing*, worth pursuing, and not the enemy of our happiness.

FLIGHT FROM PRAYER

A fourth symptom that we are starting down the wrong path is the avoidance of prayer. Prayer is like looking God in the eye. When we no longer want to look someone in the eye, it is because we are ashamed of ourselves. We don't want him to see what is going on in our hearts. When we start finding any excuse to avoid prayer, it's a sure sign that something is wrong with our consciences. When Adam and Eve sinned, the first thing they did was try to hide from God and to cover themselves up. When we no longer look on God as our best friend but rather as someone to be avoided, something is wrong. When we no longer want to talk with him and listen to him, chances are that the corruption of conscience has begun.

RATIONALIZATION

No one likes acknowledging his own mistakes. It is never easy to say, "I'm sorry. I blew it. It was my fault." But this radical honesty is essential to a healthy conscience. The opposite tendency—to defend our actions at all costs, justifying our mistakes—leads quickly to a conscience that is no longer open to the possibility of personal error. All sorts of defense mechanisms come into play. We rationalize our own wrongdoing to ourselves and defend our actions before others. We tell others not to judge and excuse ourselves with complex arguments.There are many ways of doing this. One typical way is to cover up our vices by changing their names. We can even make them sound virtuous!

Another way to rationalize our own mistakes is by comparing ourselves to other people. We direct our attention away from our own faults by saying that everybody does it, or that at least we don't do more serious things, like So-and- So does! Our own vices don't look so bad when we compare ourselves to dictators and serial killers!

When we see this happening in our own lives, we need to be attentive. Rationalization is symptomatic of a conscience that is growing warped. Behind it is the vice of pride, which never wants to admit its errors. Good conscience depends on the virtue of humility and a real willingness to be corrected.

Where does all this take us? If these are some of the signs of the corruption of conscience, what is the ideal state of conscience that we should be pursuing? Let us now examine some of the different states of conscience we can face. We will first look at some temporary states of conscience and then discuss habitual states.

STATES OF CONSCIENCE

OBJECTIVE STATES OF CONSCIENCE

Objectively speaking, conscience can either be true or false. This refers specifically to the *judgment of conscience*: the moral evaluation of a particular action. When the judgment of conscience agrees with moral truth, it is a true or upright conscience. Like a compass that really points north when it says north, a true conscience indicates the real moral quality of our actions. A conscience telling you that stealing and lying are okay is a *false conscience*, since its judgments don't agree with moral truth. A false (or erroneous) conscience is also an ignorant conscience. It doesn't correctly ascertain the moral value of a given action. This ignorance can be culpable or inculpable. That is, it may be our fault that our consciences judge badly. Maybe, for instance, we didn't form them well, or we didn't bother to learn the moral principles that should guide us, or we have tamed our consciences by habits of sin, etc. Other times the error of conscience may not be our fault. Maybe we have always been taught that a given behavior was morally correct (when in fact it is not), and we never had any reason to doubt what we were taught. In this case, we may have what ethicists call an invincibly ignorant conscience—we have no way of correcting the error.

SUBJECTIVE STATES OF CONSCIENCE

Along with the objective states of conscience—their correspondence to moral truth—there are also *subjective* states. Subjective states refer to our own perception of moral truth. Since conscience is our best guide in the present moment, we must always follow it. But sometimes conscience itself isn't sure about what we ought to do. What happens then? Let's look for a moment at some different "subjective" states of conscience.

Certain conscience. A conscience is said to be certain when we have no doubts about what we ought to do. A certain conscience—even when objectively false—always obliges, since we have no reason to doubt it is correct. As soon as some doubt enters the scene, however, we must try to clear it up.

Probable conscience. A probable conscience is one step lower than a certain conscience. Perhaps we are quite sure that we ought to act in a certain way, but a lingering doubt remains. Is this really the way I should behave? Is this truly what God wants? *In this case (irrespective of the objective truth of our moral judgment), our consciences are said to be* probable*, because we are almost sure—but not quite.* Again, the point here is not whether we are right or wrong in our judgment (the objective level), but how *sure* we are (the subjective level).

Doubtful conscience. A doubtful conscience takes us one step lower in the hierarchy of certainty. Here we really don't know what the best course of action is. We may have an inkling that it is one way rather than another, but we are basically unsure. Usually we are not obliged by a doubtful conscience. We are obliged, however, to do what we can to resolve the doubt. Many times we can clear up our doubts by *informing our consciences* regarding the moral principles in play.

Perplexed conscience. A perplexed conscience represents a particular case of doubt. Here, it seems that no matter what we do, we will act immorally. In other words, every option at our disposal seems to involve sin. This is impossible, of course, since no one is ever obliged to sin. There is always a moral option (even if it isn't always pleasant). In this regard, we see that a perplexed conscience is necessarily false (or erroneous), because it sees sin where there is none. As in the case of a doubtful conscience, the person with a perplexed conscience has the duty to try to resolve the perplexity.

HABITUAL STATES OF CONSCIENCE

Along with momentary states of conscience regarding particular judgments, there are also *habitual* states of conscience, or conditions of conscience that are more or less permanent. When our consciences are healthy, they call a spade a spade; they recognize good as good and evil as evil—and do not confuse the two. But for different reasons our consciences can get maladjusted, like a scale that reads too heavy or too light. Most of us don't mind getting on a scale that reads light.

To help distinguish a balanced conscience from one that's out of tune, we can use three adjectives to describe the degrees of sensitivity. Conscience can be habitually scrupulous, lax, or well- formed.

Scrupulous conscience. A scrupulous conscience is a sick conscience. Like the scale that reads too heavy, it makes everything appear worse than it is. It discovers sins where there are none and sees serious sin where there's merely imperfection. The scrupulous conscience is timid and fearful. A scrupulous person interprets temptations as sin, even when there has been no consent of the free will. Living with a scrupulous conscience is similar to driving a car with the parking brake on: there is constant friction, tension, and stress.

A scrupulous conscience is often a symptom of lack of confidence in the goodness and love of God. The surest cure for this moral sickness is to form one's conscience correctly, according to objective norms & to take counsel from someone with proven good judgment. In this C. S. Lewis offers advice: Remember what John says: "If our heart condemns us, God is stronger than our heart." The feeling of being, or not being forgiven and loved, is not what matters. One must come down to brass tacks. If there is a particular sin on your conscience, repent and confess it. If there isn't, tell the despondent devil not to be silly. You can't help hearing this voice (the odious inner radio) but you must treat it merely like a buzzing in your ears or any other irrational nuisance. (*Letters to an American Lady*)

Lax conscience. At the opposite end of the spectrum we find the lax conscience—the scale that reads light. The person with a lax conscience decides on insufficient grounds that an evil action is permissible, or that something gravely wrong isn't so serious. He sees virtue where there is sin and registers only flagrant deviations from the moral law.

The lax person has as his motto "To err is human" and convinces himself that either he is too weak to resist sin, or that it simply doesn't matter. He is careless and makes light of wrongdoing with the excuse that "everyone does it, so it can't be so bad." This type of individual also tends to undervalue responsibility for his actions. A lax conscience is like a stretched spring that has lost its elasticity and no longer returns to its original form. Through repeated concessions in "little things," or by ignoring its judgments, the conscience becomes dulled and insensitive.

Well- formed conscience. The well- formed conscience falls at the midpoint between the two extremes. It is delicate in the sense of attention to detail, like a painter with a delicate brush stroke, who isn't satisfied with general shapes and forms but insists on perfection. The well- formed conscience pursues excellence, but not in an anxious, sweated way. Based on love, the good conscience is dynamic and joyful. A person whose conscience is well formed is aware that he stands before God at all times and doesn't allow himself to rationalize or hide from the truth.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE

To recap some of the reflections we have made earlier, we could say that a well-formed conscience is distinguished by the following four qualities:

First, a good conscience is *active*. It doesn't leave us tranquil and complacent for long periods of time. It is a goad, an uncomfortable burr under our saddle. A good conscience is not a silent conscience that sleepily nods in approval at all our choices, like a traffic cop lackadaisically waving traffic along. A good conscience is exacting because love itself is exacting.

Second, a good conscience doesn't limit itself to our *actions* but analyzes our intentions, motivations, and underlying attitudes.

Third, a good conscience pushes us to our *best,* drawing the most out of us. It encourages, impels, suggests, and prompts. It doesn't simply register wrongdoing or reproach us for our failings but points us to the heights. "Good" is not sufficient. How about "better"?

Fourth, a good conscience turns us toward *God* rather than inward on ourselves. It makes us see our actions not just as credits or debits on our personal record, but as a generous or cold response to God's love. It pushes us to a truer love of God, because he loved us first.[4]

[4] Williams, T. (2008). *Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.

If We Know What's Right, Can We Do It?

Ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle had a lot to say about ethics, particularly what has come to be called "virtue ethics." They defended an idea we have only assumed so far, that being moral, or being virtuous, is actually a good and desirable thing that ought to be pursued. But not everybody agrees with that today. Some people hold that being virtuous is for chumps or losers, that in a dog-eat-dog world where you have to look out for number one, being moral holds you back. This is the worldview popularized by the reality TV show *Survivor.* And it is sometimes expressed by Donald Trump and the participants in his show, *The Apprentice.* So how would you answer the question "Why be moral?"

We have already seen that good ethics are critical for a properly functioning society, particularly one that holds freedom in such high regard. Most people would not want to live in a society in which morality was unimportant, in which conceptions of right and wrong carried little weight. In fact, it is unlikely that any civilized society could continue unless it had concern for important moral values such as fairness, justice, truthfulness, and compassion. Most people seem to recognize intuitively that there is something important for the culture about people being good. Ethics are essential because they give direction to people and societies who have some sense that they cannot flourish without being moral.

Free societies require virtuous people capable of the self-restraint morality provides. In fact, when the notion of freedom was articulated centuries ago, it was not freedom to do whatever you wanted to do, it was freedom *to do what you thought was right,* what your conscience dictated to you was right. Only more recently has the idea of freedom been divorced from virtue and degenerated into autonomy almost without limits. Michael Miller points out, "If we are going to have self-government, we need to be self-governors." And that means we must cultivate the virtues that enable people to practice the habits necessary for free societies to flourish.

That helps answer the big-picture question "Why should society (everyone else) be moral?" But let's be more specific and ask, "Why should *I* be moral?" How would you respond to that question? Most people, when they are genuinely honest with themselves, associate doing well in life with being a good person. Having moral character is still essential to most people's conceptions of what makes a person flourish in his or her life. For example, it is difficult to imagine a person being considered a success in life if she has gained her wealth dishonestly. It is equally difficult to call a person a success who is at the top of his profession but cheats on his wife, abuses his children, and drinks too much. On the other hand, we rightly hold up someone like Mother Teresa as a model of a person having lived a good life, even though she lacked most material goods society values. One of the principal reasons for being moral is that being a good person is central to most concepts of human fulfillment. For the Christian, being moral is critical to a life that seeks to honor God. Being moral is important because God highly recommends it! The reason he does, and the reason we can say that being moral is inherently good, is because it is foundational to a person's flourishing in life. Having a good life and being a good person still go hand in hand for most people.

The ancient philosophers were very clear in the way they understood this connection between virtue and a good life. In fact, this was the reason they saw ethics as such an important component of a person's overall approach to life. Socrates, when describing the importance of

ethics, said, “We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.” Similarly, Plato held that being a good person was inherently valuable apart from any benefits it produced for a person. In his classic story “The Myth of Gyges,” Gyges was given the chance to live as an invisible person; he could do anything he wanted with the assurance he would never be caught or held accountable for any of it. Plato pressed the question that if a person could get away with everything he ever wanted to do, would a person want to be moral, and if so, why? He concluded that being virtuous was intrinsically valuable and critical to a good life. For Plato, the notion of justice, or integrity, was not necessarily something a person did but was a condition of a person’s soul. In his best-known work, *The Republic,* he compared the soul to the city, calling the city “a soul writ large.” He maintained that a just city is a city that is functioning properly, with all people fulfilling the roles they are designed to fulfill, all doing their parts with excellence. He argued that integrity is parallel to this—with the component parts of a person’s soul all functioning according to their designed function, with reason controlling the passions. The person who has his or her soul in order in this way is said to have justice in the soul. Thus, justice is not primarily something you do, but is something you are. It is a condition of one’s soul first and an action one performs second. This is why Plato connected integrity and a good life. He held that if your soul is in disarray, you not only lack integrity, but you can’t possibly have a good life. Of course, a just person was also expected to perform just actions, but what is important here is to recognize that the idea of justice for Plato is an overall condition of a person’s inner life. This is parallel to what Dallas Willard calls “the well-ordered heart.” And this is what we sometimes mean when we say a person “has it together,” referring to his or her inner life that is in order.

Other ancient philosophers echoed this understanding of ethics being about a person’s whole life. This is why they made the connection between virtue and happiness so easily. For example, Aristotle maintained that virtue was essential to happiness. He went a bit further than Plato—he was more specific in what the virtues were and how they were derived. He made this connection between happiness and virtue: “Happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue.” The Roman philosopher Epicurus, who came along after Aristotle, said it clearly too: “It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly.” You might be familiar with Epicurus—he’s the one for whom the philosophy of Epicureanism is named. But what you might not know is that the “eat, drink, and be merry” hedonistic view of life commonly associated with Epicureanism actually has nothing to do with his philosophy. I suspect he turns over in his grave when he hears this association of hedonism with his views! He believed that to flourish in a difficult world required virtue and prudence. He saw virtue as a critical element to living well. These philosophers certainly echo what Jesus taught when he said, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8:36). Despite the understandable cynicism about virtue in the culture today, I think we still believe virtue and a good life are connected, that there is something important about being a good person.

Back to Virtue

The thinking of the ancient philosophers whom I have cited—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and others—was adopted and expanded by some of the best Christian philosophers of the early and medieval history of Christianity. Thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas continued the tradition of virtue begun by the ancients and integrated it with the teachings of Christianity. For

example, Aristotle placed great importance on having a moral example—someone who could model the virtues and be emulated. In Christian teaching, Jesus filled that role perfectly, being the ideal example of character. As a result, the New Testament emphasizes becoming like Jesus as the goal of a person's spiritual life. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 are the character traits of Jesus produced by the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. For Augustine and Aquinas, the fruit of the Spirit continued the ancient tradition of connecting virtue and the good life but put it in distinctly Christian terms.

However, after medieval Christianity and with the coming of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, there was a shift away from this emphasis on virtue toward a different formulation of ethics. Part of the reason for this change came from the more general movement in the Enlightenment away from religion, particularly Christianity, as the dominant way of viewing the world. Several different efforts were made to base morality on something beside Christian theology. One clear example is the utilitarian ethic of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, which sought explicitly to determine right and wrong without appeal to God or the Bible but instead by appeal to the consequences of a particular action or moral rule. Similarly, Immanuel Kant sought to derive moral principles based on what he called the "categorical imperative," or the principle of universalizability, without explicit appeal to religious views (though Kant did believe that God was necessary ultimately to ground morality). By contrast, Thomas Hobbes sought to derive moral duties from our self-interested nature, leading to what is known today as ethical egoism. And David Hume grounded morality in what is immediately pleasing or agreeable, paving the way for moral subjectivism.

The overall difference in the way ethics was done in the Enlightenment was a move toward assessment of *actions* rather than character. Morality was viewed more as a way to help people make decisions about moral dilemmas than it was a guide to what constituted a good life. As a result, ethics became less tied to virtue and character and more about moral decision making. Unfortunately, one of the casualties of the Enlightenment collapse of the medieval Christian worldview was the virtue tradition of the ancients developed by Aquinas. It was the beginning of the secularization of ethics and has resulted in the relativism and subjectivism I have already discussed.

Recent years have seen an encouraging resurgence of interest in virtue ethics. Its proponents recognize that an ethic that only addresses decisions and dilemmas is incomplete. They aren't saying we don't ever need guidance to make moral decisions and resolve moral dilemmas, but today's virtue ethics insists there is much more to the moral life than that. They argue correctly that there is more to being moral than simply making the right decisions. They criticize what they call "action-oriented ethics" for emphasizing doing over being, following abstract moral rules instead of exemplary people, stressing actions over attitudes/motives, and obeying rules over developing character. Ethics is reduced to solving hard cases and is moved to the extremes of life, rather than being part of the everyday life of the average person. They further point out that action-oriented ethics provide little motivation for doing the right thing, and that without motivation, moral obligations can become rigid and legalistic and essentially amount to a façade of morality to hide character defects.

In addition, in keeping with the individualistic temper of the Enlightenment, action-oriented ethics overemphasize the ability of each person to arrive at his or her moral duties by reason and in isolation. The virtue tradition, by contrast, stresses the development of virtue in community.

This continues Aristotle's emphasis that the virtues cannot be lived apart from the community, since the purpose for developing the virtues is to enable a person to live well in the community.

Philosopher Peter Kreeft argues that ethics without virtue is "ethics light." He suggests that what is taught in the university today is a truncated view of ethics that is divorced from character and can actually be dangerous. He says, "Ethics without virtue is a 'little morality.' … Ethics without virtue is an illusion."

CULTIVATING VIRTUE

So how do you become a good person? How do you connect the moral law we can know with actually doing it as a matter of habit? Our culture suggests various ways. The first is by *rules and compliance.* Virtue is encouraged in the corporate world by multiplying rules and regulations, and by assuming that adhering to them is the same thing as developing virtue. For example, in my corporate ethics consulting work, I have had considerable resistance to the idea that compliance and ethics are not the same thing. At one point, I had a conversation with the "integrity" officer for a hospital for which I was doing consulting. She was operating under the assumption that what she was involved with was clearly ethics. So I asked her, "What exactly is your job as the integrity officer for the hospital?" She replied without hesitation, "My full-time job is to make sure that our top executives and managers don't go to jail." I replied, "I thought the bar for ethics was a bit higher than ending the calendar year without indictments being handed down!"

Of course, the problem with adding a lot of rules is that they don't make us more inclined to follow the rules. Rather, they often make us more inclined to break them. They can actually make us better at finding loopholes so that we can technically follow the rules and still do what we want. Jesus repeatedly pointed out to the religious leaders of his day that multiplying the rules actually undermined virtue and one's relationship to God. He quoted from the prophet Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules" (Mark 7:6–7).

Often rules are put in place to protect us—that is, protect us from *others* who might want to do us harm. But the rules do not and cannot protect us from *ourselves,* in large part because one can follow the rules for all the wrong reasons and with all the wrong attitudes. This is why rules are so counter to the tradition of virtue and why philosophers through the ages have emphasized that morality is incomplete without the cultivation of virtue.

The culture's second strategy with regard to virtue is *incentives.* That is, incentives work to show us that being virtuous is in our self-interest. To put it more plainly, incentives attempt to buy us into cultivating virtue. For example, much of the discussion in business ethics revolves around the question of whether good ethics is also good business (in terms of profitability). Many people believe it is, and they use this to encourage ethical behavior in the marketplace. If you do the right thing, your actions will build trust and make you more profitable. In some instances, this is true. In the long run, it may be true more often than not. But think about this: if virtuous behavior were always good business, then the field of business ethics would be out of business! That's because everyone would do the right thing all the time unless they were stupid or shortsighted.

The reason we have business ethics is because being virtuous often involves a cost. We often refer to ethical issues as "temptations," because that's precisely what they are. They involve a conflict between our self-interest and the demands of virtue, and the requirements of virtue generally ought to trump our self-interest.

Incentives don't often encourage virtue in a long-lasting way. The incentives in our culture do not encourage things like delaying gratification but rather press us to live for the here and now. They do not encourage sexual purity and marital faithfulness or generosity or moderation. And there is no reason to equate what's right with what's in our self-interest. If that could be done, then cultivating virtue would be exponentially easier than it is and would not require the discipline to develop those habits.

A third strategy of the culture to produce good people is *education.* We commonly assume that if people are not doing what is right, it must be because they are uninformed and in need of education. Underlying this assumption is the notion that if people know the right thing to do, they will do it. But just as there is no inherent connection between success and being a good person, there is no link between being educated and being a good person.

This is why education in most secular universities cannot be the way virtue is cultivated, because it simply doesn't include matters of character and how that contributes to a good life. As my graduate school mentor put it, "All education does for us is to make us smarter sinners."[8]

A fourth way our culture attempts to foster virtue is by urging us to *look inside ourselves.* Though it is true that the unexamined life is not worth living, attempting to find your moral compass by looking inside yourself is an ironic way to do that. I have said already that the conscience is not infallible and needs to be trained, and that the conscience is broken just like all other parts of a person's nature. But imagine that you tried to use a compass to find your way out of being lost—but you had a magnet on your back, which meant the compass was always pointed at you! It would be useless to help you find your way. What makes a field compass effective is the same thing that makes a moral compass effective—it points to a fixed reference point outside yourself (God's moral law, which can be known) and tells you where you are.

Cultivating virtue is not a simple task but the project of a lifetime. It begins by recognizing that being good and living a good life are integrally connected. It proceeds by small steps and decisions that develop the *habits* of virtue. The ancient philosophers understood that this involves practice and discipline so that the virtues become habitual. Aristotle, for example, spoke of reason governing the passions as critical to having a good life. More recently C. S. Lewis described the cultivation of virtue as the development of "the chest" of a person. "It still remains true that no justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions, the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.… As the King governs by his executive, so reason in man must rule the mere appetites by means of the 'spirited element.' *The head rules the belly through the chest*—the seat of the emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments."

Lewis, back in the 1940s, lamented that what culture and education are producing today are "men without chests." That is, to be without a chest is to be without the ability to train one's emotions so that the passions can be controlled and thereby do not rule one's life. Lewis prophetically argued that education has left the culture devoid of the ability to cultivate virtue.

Lewis maintained that the result is this tension between the need to have good people in society and the loss of the ability to produce them. He said, "In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. *We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise.* We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

Let's be more specific about how virtue is cultivated. First, it begins with families. The primary training ground for character is at home as parents teach and model virtue for their children. This is part of the sacred task of parenting and why even with the fracturing of the family today, parents remain the best hope for cultivating virtue in the next generation. Other institutions can come alongside families and assist in this, such as schools, churches, and other voluntary organizations. Churches, for example, should not become a substitute for parents teaching and modeling virtue. Churches should actually be equipping families to instill character in their children.

What begins in families must be reinforced with accountability. The virtues are lived in community, not in isolation. Though it is true that a person's character is who he or she is when no one is looking, virtue does not happen in seclusion.

A third critical element in cultivating virtue is the practice of repentance. Since we all are capable of self-deception (some might say we are actually quite skilled at it!) and moral failure, repentance is a necessary part of character formation. This assumes humility and a basic distrust of ourselves and our motives. But repentance does more than remind us of our past failures; it helps us exercise our habits of virtue by pointing us in the direction of virtue. I have found there are few more powerful ways to model virtue in my family than to admit to my wife and children when I have made a mistake. For me to come clean with them when I blow it not only tells them I am human, but it points them toward the right by showing them exactly where I failed and what I want to do differently in the future. It is my relationship with them that also reinforces my desire to live virtuously among them, not wanting to hurt those whom I love the most.

VIRTUE IN A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Putting the cultivation of virtue within a distinctively Christian worldview makes the journey clearer, but it also raises some profound questions about the connection between Christian faith and virtue. Christian faith clarifies our understanding of the life of virtue in at least three important ways. The first is that Christianity spells out specifically what the virtues are and provides a model for what a life of virtue looks like. The virtues are the character traits of Jesus, made evident in his earthly life and explained by the apostle Paul as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Jesus furnished his followers with a model of the ideal person of virtue. One of the difficulties that plagues many non-Christian accounts of virtue is how to determine what the virtues are and what they are based on. Aristotle tried to explain the virtues with his Golden Mean—the virtue was the mean between two extremes. For example, courage is the mean between the two extremes of cowardice and rashness. Other virtue theorists have attempted to ground the virtues in some account of human nature. Sometimes it seems that proponents of virtue can't define the virtues but insist that they know a virtuous person when they see one.

A Christian worldview provides a well-defined account of what makes a virtue a virtue and links it to the example provided by Jesus. Ultimately, developing a life of virtue consists of faithfully becoming more like Jesus, developing the habits of emulating him.

A second element a Christian worldview gives to our understanding of virtue is a more profound motive for cultivating character. As I mentioned earlier, the Christian answer to the question "Why be moral?" is that God highly recommends it. Ultimately, the motive for a life of virtue is that it is pleasing to God and is the only appropriate response to his overwhelming grace in our lives; it's not to earn God's favor but is because of his unconditional favor toward us. The decision to follow Jesus is fundamentally a decision to become like him, living that out in the community of God's people and in the surrounding culture.

A Christian worldview also connects the life of virtue to a vision of the good life, which in a Christian worldview involves knowing Jesus, becoming more like him, and living to serve in his kingdom. This definition of the good life as knowing Jesus provides an important relational component to the motive for virtue. Ultimately the reason I want to develop the habits of virtue and avoid the patterns of vice is not because of guilt or shame or some abstract notion of morality. *It is because I don't want to hurt someone I love—my Savior, Jesus.* I often ask my married students a question that brings this home to them: "What is it that keeps you faithful to your spouse?" I suggest that it is not primarily because adultery is wrong—though it clearly is. Nor is it because their spouses have threatened them with bodily harm if they cheat—that may or may not be true! Nor is it that they will likely be overwhelmed with guilt. The most compelling reason is that they don't want to hurt those they love—their spouses and children. This is what the Bible calls "godly sorrow" for sin, in contrast to guilt and self-condemnation, which is the common response to moral failure. The Bible indicates that there is no longer any condemnation for the believer, and thus the self-condemnation that so often accompanies moral failure has no place in the believer's spiritual experience (Rom. 8:1).

A third element a Christian worldview provides for virtue is the most important. Christian faith takes our fallen nature very seriously, and it is not assumed that if you know the right thing to do that you will do it. In fact, the Bible asserts the converse of that—that often knowing the right thing to do makes it less likely, not more, that you will actually do it. This seems to be the heart of Paul's teaching in Romans 7: there is an *inverse relationship* between knowing the right thing and doing it. As a result, the Bible insists that becoming like Jesus involves a combination of our choices and decisions and the transforming activity of God's Spirit (Rom. 8:12–13; 2 Cor. 3:17–18; Gal. 5:16–18). The life of virtue is referred to as the fruit of *the Spirit* because it is the activity of God's Spirit in conjunction with our habits, choices, and disciplines.

This intersection of virtue and a Christian worldview also raises some profound and puzzling questions. The most basic of these is simply, "Can a person be good without God?" This question needs to be clarified before attempting an answer. If what is meant by this is a more philosophical question—Can a person have an adequate grounding for moral values and virtues without God?—I have already that the answer is a resounding no. But if the meaning is whether a person can be good without a saving relationship with God, that's a different question, and the answer is yes. A person who does not know Christ can certainly exhibit virtuous traits and behaviors and can even be considered a good person. Devout people of other faiths are good examples of this—someone like Gandhi, for example.

I suspect you know people who are not Christians but who live good lives, maybe even better lives than many Christians you know. Someone might object that the Bible says there is no one who is good and no one who seeks after God (Rom. 3:10–12). But this is not intended in an absolute sense, that no one apart from Christ ever does anything good. Rather, no one is good in the sense that his or her goodness is sufficient to merit salvation from God. In other words, a person can be good, but not good enough to earn salvation. Thus, it is possible for a person to be virtuous without saving grace, but that virtue is not enough to warrant being justified before God. Justification comes only by receiving the free gift of salvation from a perfect and gracious Savior, Jesus. This is why in addition to encouraging people to cultivate virtue, we also need to share with them the good news of the gospel of Jesus.

A second question then comes to mind: Do we have sufficient motive for virtue apart from a relationship with God? Similar to the previous question, it seems possible that a person could be motivated to cultivate character apart from, or prior to, conversion to Christianity. It is possible to have a conception of the good life that can motivate a life of virtue. After all, the ancient philosophers had a fairly well-developed conception of the good life and how integral virtue was to achieving it. And it is a good thing to encourage people in the culture to live virtuous lives. But they also need the good news of the gospel of Christ in order to have a fully grounded view of the good life and the corresponding place of virtue in it.

A third question may sound a bit like the first two: Can a person have genuine moral reform without a religious conversion? The deeper question applies to the culture at large. Is it possible, or likely, that there is a broad "reformation of manners," with the twofold goals of the English MP William Wilberforce? By "manners" he did not mean etiquette but rather morality. It is no accident that some of the most profound movements of social reform followed the religious revivals known as the Great Awakenings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter expresses skepticism that such a moral reformation is possible without the resources religious communities provide. He describes the efforts of the culture to cultivate virtue without those resources: "While we desperately want the flower of morality to bloom and multiply, we have, at the same time, pulled the plant up out from the soil that sustains it." Though Hunter does not hold that character requires religious faith, character does require "the conviction of *truth made sacred,* abiding as an authoritative presence within consciousness and life, reinforced by habits institutionalized within a moral community" and as part of "a story about living for a purpose that is bigger than oneself," so that people "come to understand not only how to be good but why." **Truth made sacred thus gives virtue its "commanding character and thus the power to inspire and shame."** This underscores how important it is to have morality within the framework of the sacred. Ultimately, a Christian worldview provides such a framework for morality to be compelling.[5]

[5] Rae, S. B. (2013). *Doing the right thing: making moral choices in a world full of options* (pp. 61–82). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

MORAL SENSE AND PRACTICAL JUDGMENT

According to some, conscience is the awareness that there is a moral dimension to one's conduct, together with the urge to prefer right over wrong. Others would say that conscience is conformity to one's own sense of right conduct. Still others speak of a practical judgment regarding the moral quality of our actions or the voice of God in the soul. When we stop to examine the nature of conscience, several qualities emerge.

ETHICAL EYESIGHT

Conscience is to the soul what the eyes are to the body. It lets in light and allows us to see things as they really are. Our eyes reveal the physical properties of things, while conscience unveils the moral quality of our actions. Conscience, like eyesight, is personal and intimate, but objective. It is personal in the same way that seeing is personal. We all see the same thing, but we see it in our own way. Conscience looks at moral reality and communicates what it sees. If conscience is sound, it will communicate moral truth.

If a person's cornea is deformed, he may see things as taller and thinner than they actually are. Without an operation or corrective lenses, he will never be able to judge distance, depth, or form correctly. Some art historians suggest, for example, that the elongated figures of El Greco's paintings are due to a visual dysfunction rather than a revolutionary artistic technique. The same can happen with our consciences. If they get bent out of shape, we will judge our actions in a distorted way—things that are wrong will seem right, while things that are right may appear wrong.

Today conscience is often glorified as an unerring guide of conduct, the single undisputable reference point for good and evil: "This is a personal matter between me and my conscience." "You follow your conscience, I will follow mine." "As long as it is okay according to your conscience, it is all right." But there is a problem with this way of thinking. Just as our eyes don't impose form on what we see, but simply recognize the form that is there, so, too, conscience doesn't *determine* right and wrong, it merely *acknowledges* it.

Though conscience judges, it doesn't *create* good and bad, any more than my eyes create the reality they are seeing. I cannot make a bad action good by simply declaring it to be so. My conscience is not the ultimate foundation of moral value. It gauges my actions according to an objective order of right and wrong that transcends it. Otherwise, conscience would possess no moral authority in our lives, since, as the great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis notes, "Those who create conscience cannot be subject to conscience themselves."

In the case of human inventions, *we* write rules for the game. But in the case of *right* and *wrong,* there are fixed standards. In the depths of our consciences we recognize the existence of a law we did not write, but which we feel we must obey. We have the power to *choose* right or wrong—but we do not have the power to *declare* what is right and wrong and have it be so. We can decide we do not need oxygen, but after a minute or so our bodies will remind us that they were not consulted in the decision.

Certain things are the way they are despite our opinions or personal wishes, and this is true in our moral lives as well. There is, of course, plenty of grey in the moral landscape. Sometimes there may be more than one right road. Moreover, many issues we feel strongly about may not even be "moral" questions at all. Conscience helps us to distinguish between moral imperatives and simple social mores or questions of etiquette. Not every practical question is a moral matter, and many times our deliberations may revolve more around clarifying our own tastes and priorities than the application of ethical principles.

Many true moral quandaries themselves do not admit of an easy, black- and- white answer. Take the area of bioethics. Especially today, with the dizzying advances of the medical sciences, the sheer number of variables makes many moral problems so complex that a slight shift in circumstances may substantially change the moral conclusion. Furthermore, the radical differences of opinion found even among ethical "experts" may make us legitimately wonder whether a right or wrong answer even *exists*, let alone whether we can find it. Yet even in the midst of all the grey, conscience continues to prod us toward conscientious moral decisions. It won't allow us to abdicate our ethical responsibility just because the answers do not immediately emerge with pristine clarity. We are called to be good, both in the simple decisions of every day and in the anguished choices that decisively shape our lives.

THE GIFT OF CONSCIENCE

Regardless of their simplicity or complexity, right and wrong are not arbitrary but *reasonable*. The moral law is not the invention of some whimsical lawgiver. God does not command honesty, justice, and temperance because he feels like it, but because they are truly good for us. He loves us, and the moral law we discover within us is his gift to us. What is *morally* good is also really good for us. Our ability to distinguish right from wrong—conscience—is the precious tool that we have to choose well and to build a good life.

Our consciences guide us in much the same way a compass helps a ship stay on course. A compass indicates north, south, east, and west. If the compass is true, all the helmsman need do is follow the arrow north and he will be sure of sailing north. If the compass is faulty, it may read north for what is actually southeast. That is, he will be *subjectively* correct but *objectively* in error. For the sailor who really wants to reach his destination, a well- tuned compass is essential. For a person who truly wants to be good, a well- tuned conscience is indispensable.

Even though conscience often seems more like a ball and chain than wings, if we really think about it, conscience—especially for a Christian—is one of the most precious gifts we have received. Conscience provides a sure guide for the use of our freedom. It allows us to become the persons we were meant to be. And when we stray from the right path, conscience calls us back and shows us the path. It opens the door to conversion and repentance.[6]

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[6] Williams, T. (2008). *Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.

THE LAMP OF THE BODY

What the Bible Tells Us About Conscience

Why does a Christian need conscience anyway? With God's Word to guide us, why fall back on a rational calculation of right and wrong? Why bring conscience into the equation? In a word, isn't Scripture enough? The answer, of course, is yes and no. God's Word is indeed enough, sharper than any two- edged sword, and contains the saving truth we need to know God through his son Jesus Christ. Yet the Scriptures themselves attest to the importance of conscience. They teach us much about discerning right from wrong, and what it is that God expects from us. His Word resounds in our consciences, and conscience, in turn, calls us to be faithful to his Word. Conscience, in sum, is a thoroughly *biblical* concept.

Christianity begins with God's own self- revelation in his Son Jesus and continues with the faith to believe in him and follow him. It cannot be reduced to a moral message or an ethical code. Yet following Jesus does have an important moral dimension, too. It involves free choice and shapes our actions and decisions. Thus, while Christianity is broader and deeper than morality, it does include a very specific moral code essential to the Christian life. Being a Christian means subscribing to a specific body of doctrine as well as a singular lifestyle, in imitation of Christ and in obedience to his teaching. Christian conscience, as the mind thinking morally, shares its basic form and structure with the structure of human reasoning. At the same time its points of reference are distinctly Christian, both at the level of *intention* and the level of *content*.

PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN CONDUCT

The question of Christian morality ties in directly to the question of eternal salvation. In his gospel account, Saint Matthew relates how a man approached Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" He specifically wanted a guide for his behavior that would be pleasing to God and thus could serve as a compass for his choices. Jesus responds, "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." Jesus accepts the premise of his interlocutor (the relationship between actions and eternal life) and answers him directly. He offers norms that will guide the man's ethical decisions. The specific content of these norms becomes even clearer when the man questions him further: "Which ones?" Jesus answers, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:16–19). Christian conscience needs points of reference—principles, prescriptions, norms—in order to bring the general goal of "being holy as God is holy" down to earth. So Jesus reaffirms the commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Yet he doesn't stop there.

Jesus will add his own unique contribution to the moral law in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, notably making the commandments extend not only to external actions but also to internal attitudes and intentions. He will also command love not only of neighbor, but even of one's enemies, and will require that his followers be merciful, "as your heavenly Father is merciful" (see Luke 6:36). But while making it more demanding, he does not reject the old Law. Rather he states unequivocally: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17–18).

Yet even the most precise moral precepts demand the mediation of conscience. We know that we are not to murder, to commit adultery, and that we are to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. In practice, what does this all mean? Discernment is necessary. So is the translation of general norms to my specific case here and now. Sometimes this discernment is ridiculously easy. Other times, the discernment is far more complex.

The issues get trickier still when we talk about the application of the *positive* precepts that enjoin us to do (and not merely avoid) certain things. How am I to "love my neighbor"? What does that mean for me today? Here conscience has its work cut out for it! Biblical norms shape our outlook on life and the way we approach God and other people. But the Bible also enjoins us to be discerning, and to seek out God's will. It lays the basis for a truly Christian understanding of conscience. Let's look more closely.

KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Conscience is all about knowing right from wrong. Here, too, the Bible has much to say about the importance of moral knowledge. We can see this by looking at the reality of sin. In the Bible, sin comprises a double dimension, the *objective* dimension of an action or omission in disaccord with God's will, and the *subjective* dimension of intentionality, tied closely to knowledge of what God wants. Let's take the example of the sin of idolatry. Worshiping a false god is simply wrong, whether we know it or not. It becomes especially grave, however, when we *deliberately* do it, knowing that it is wrong.

In several passages of the Old Testament we find the idea of sinning *unintentionally*, through ignorance (Ezek. 45:20; Lev. 4:2, 13–14, 22–23, 27–28, 5:14, 18–19; Num. 15:22–24, 27–28). Though such sins must be atoned for, there is no question that the punishment stipulated for *deliberate* sin, committed with full knowledge, is far weightier. In this sense, the Bible confirms what we know intuitively: some degree of knowledge is necessary for there to be personal responsibility. Knowledge of God's will is considered a grace, and the just Israelite begged God for it. Without light from above conscience is incapable of fully knowing God's will. In fact, one cannot even know the depths of one's own heart. The psalmist, after praising God's law as a source of wisdom, joy, and enlightenment, offers the following prayer to God: "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (Ps. 19:12). Even for the person who desires to be true to God, moral discernment requires divine assistance. In his teaching, too, Jesus links moral responsibility with knowledge of right and wrong. On the cross, Jesus prays for those who put him to death with the words "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Why does Jesus add the expression "they do not know what they are doing"? He seems to be offering his Father a possible *motive* for granting forgiveness, meant to attenuate the guilt of his executioners. Just as knowledge confers responsibility, ignorance lessens it.

Nowhere does the relationship between moral responsibility and knowledge come across more clearly than in Jesus' parable of the unfaithful steward (Luke 12:41–48). The master returns at an hour the servants do not expect and it is not a pretty sight. On evaluating the situation, Jesus offers the following verdict:

That slave *who knew what his master wanted*, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But *the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating* will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (Luke 12:47–48, emphasis added)

From this moral story we can draw several lessons.

First, it is clear that right and wrong do not depend solely on one's *intention*, because both servants deserve a beating for their conduct, whether they realize it or not. There is an objective standard according to which the servants' behavior can be qualified as good or bad. It is Paul who writes: "Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9–10 rsv). Certain behavior is pleasing to God and other actions are displeasing to him. Yet the servants' *knowledge* of what was expected of them affects their personal responsibility. Here there is a difference between *objective* right and wrong, determined by correspondence to what the master wanted (God's will), and *subjective* responsibility and culpability.

Second, ignorance of the master's wishes attenuates guilt but doesn't necessarily remove it. Jesus says that "the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating" for what he has done will receive a light punishment. The one who is privy to his master's wishes is clearly more responsible for his conduct than the one who had only his good moral sense to guide him. But the other bears some responsibility as well. We understand that even those without an explicit knowledge of God's will are still responsible for their conduct and possess at least a rudimentary sense of right and wrong. Even with no precise awareness of his master's wishes, the conduct of the servant (beating his fellow servants, drunkenness) was hardly exemplary, and he knew it.

Some degree of moral knowledge is accessible to all, through the natural law written on the human heart In an important passage, which also has relevance to our discussion of conscience, Paul writes: When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Romans 2:14–16)

For those who have the benefit of divine revelation, conscience testifies to the moral law as communicated through God's Word. Yet all possess some knowledge of what God expects, and conscience bears witness also to this natural law inscribed on the human heart. Paul does not merely acknowledge that conscience acts as a witness; he also reveals the way in which conscience performs that function. He speaks of "conflicting thoughts" that accuse or excuse the Gentiles with regard to their behavior. The term "conflicting thoughts" clarifies the precise nature of conscience: it is a moral judgment about man and his actions, a judgment of either acquittal or of condemnation, according as human acts are in conformity or not with the law of God written on the heart.

Third, the responsibility attached to *knowing* the master's will is compounded by the added factor of *trust*. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." God does not require the same response from everyone, and the accountability of each depends on what he has been given. At the Last Supper, Jesus would say to his apostles: "I do not call you servants any longer, because *the servant does not know* what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because *I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father"* (John 15:15 nsrv, emphasis added). To his "friends" God gives knowledge of himself and of his will, on trust. From these he expects more. He assigns a mission to each, a "vocation," and he looks for faithful correspondence to his plan.

Thus, conscience does not look only to a universal list of moral norms, applicable to all, but also to the *specific response* he expects from me alone. This is, incidentally, an important reason not to compare ourselves with others, since only God knows what he has given to each one and what he expects as a response.

In his epistle, James plainly lays out the close connection between knowledge of the moral law and personal responsibility, specifically as regards sin. "Anyone, then, who *knows* the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (James 4:17, emphasis added). By this definition, sin consists not only in morally reprehensible action or inaction but requires moral knowledge as well. Jesus says something similar in regard to the Jews' rejection of him: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin" (John 15:22).

Yet though moral knowledge is a necessary condition for *sin*, it is also vital in order to lead a life pleasing to God. Knowledge of God's will is a blessing, not a curse. Paul prayed for the Colossians that "through perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding you should reach the fullest knowledge of his will and so be able to lead a life worthy of the Lord, a life acceptable to him in all its aspects" (Col. 1:9–10). Throughout Sacred Scripture knowledge of God's will is never considered a burden, but a great blessing and the key to wisdom and happiness.

MORAL SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

We have already seen that conscience functions like a sort of moral eyesight, and this is confirmed in Jesus' words. "The eye is the lamp of the body," he says. "So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:22–23). In what way is conscience a lamp? Not that it *produces* light, but that it allows light in. Conscience is a gift, just as eyesight is. Without it, we stumble about in the dark. Light, is, of course, the first gift, without which eyesight would be useless, and Jesus himself is the light. At the same time, our eyes allow us to see the light. Moral blindness is the worst of evils, sometimes worse than sin itself. When we sin, we prefer darkness to the light and repentance is always possible; when one is spiritually blind, he no longer distinguishes between light and darkness.

Light is to the eyes what moral truth is to conscience. Knowledge of this truth is essential for acting rightly. In Saint John's Gospel we read how Christ cures a man born blind. At the end of the narrative Jesus exclaims that he came into this world for judgment so that the blind may see, and those who do see may become blind. On hearing this, some of the Pharisees near him said to him, "Surely, we are not blind, are we?" At this Jesus responded, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:40–41). Perhaps ignorance of God's will would have been a justification, but their insistence that they see makes them responsible for their lack of acceptance of God's plan. Conscience, like eyesight, not only discerns light and darkness, right and wrong, but also various shades of *grey*.

A good conscience detects the relative importance or weight of the moral principles to be applied. Though moral goodness means a loving devotion to the *whole* of moral truth rather than a pick- and-choose approach to morality, conscience also distinguishes a hierarchy among moral norms.

Jesus railed against the Pharisees for their lack of this discernment, denouncing them for "straining out gnats and swallowing camels," a colorful way of saying that they had their priorities backwards (see Matt. 23:24). As an example of this, Jesus says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others" (Matt. 23:23). Jesus specifically teaches that certain precepts of the law—justice and mercy and faith—are "weightier" than others, in this case, the exact tithing of herbs. A good conscience not only recognizes what is right and what is wrong but discerns which activities take precedence. It arranges our moral priorities according to God's will.

Nowhere does the Bible support the claim that conscience is an infallible guide or the final judge of our moral character. Just as a person may be nearsighted, farsighted, astigmatic, or even totally blind, so, too, with conscience. Blindness to moral truth occurs just as physical blindness does. Jesus says that an hour is coming when people's consciences will be so obscured that "those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" (John 16:2). Paul describes those who in later times will renounce the faith as those "whose consciences are seared with a hot iron" (1 Tim. 4:1–2). Even in his own case, Paul is circumspect about the judgment of his conscience. "My conscience does not reproach me," writes Paul, "but that is not enough to justify me: it is the Lord who is my judge" (1 Corinthians 4:4 njb). It is the Lord "who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart" (1 Cor 4:5). Unfortunately, the human person seems especially susceptible to blindness of *his own* moral situation, which is the proper domain of conscience.

Look, for instance, at the well- known case of King David and his double sin of adultery and murder. After committing adultery with and impregnating Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, David tries to get Uriah to sleep with his wife, to cover up his sin. When this attempt fails, David has Uriah sent to the front lines of battle to be killed, so that David's adultery will not be found out. Once Uriah is dead, the last obstacle is removed and David marries the widowed Bathsheba and everything seems resolved. Despite his heinous crime, David goes on with life as if nothing had happened.

To rouse David's lethargic conscience, God sends the prophet Nathan to bring his sin before his eyes. Nathan tells David a story about a rich man with all sorts of sheep who takes a poor neighbor's only little lamb to serve to guests, since he doesn't want to take one from his own flocks. At this, David becomes filled with righteous anger and declares: "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." At this, Nathan immediately retorts, "You are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:5–7). **David saw so clearly in the abstract, but his conscience was blind to his own reality.**

Sometimes those with the greatest interest in changing others have the greatest need of change themselves. Jesus notes the very human tendency to acute perception of others' faults coexisting with near blindness to our own.

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye," he asks, "but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Matthew 7:3–5)

A dull conscience regarding our own wrongdoing and need for conversion can coexist with meticulous keenness in observing our neighbor's smallest faults. Jesus reminds us that we must convert ourselves before helping others to convert.

CONSCIENCE AND JUDGMENT

Conscience does indeed judge our actions, not in order to condemn us, but to rectify our conduct. It helps us put our house in order, in preparation for that final judgment where Christ himself will judge our actions. Conscience, then, not only helps us to be good persons here and now, it also aids us in following Christ with its reward of eternal life. Jesus tells us that "the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done" (Matt. 16:27). He will repay us according to our actions, and conscience helps us know what he is looking for.

Scripture tells us that God's judgment is *just*; it is *fair*. "As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is *just"* (John 5:30), says Jesus. What does justice mean here? Obviously, it means that people get what they deserve, or that their reward or punishment in some way corresponds to their free actions. That doesn't mean, of course, that anyone deserves the glory of heaven, since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Justification is, to be sure, a free gift of God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Put in another way, no one gets *less* than he deserves, though clearly many will get *more* than they deserve.

My good conduct cannot *earn* my salvation—Jesus won salvation by his obedience and death on the cross—but it is a necessary *condition* for salvation. It manifests my response to the gift Christ holds out to me and shows whether my faith in him is real, or merely lip service. Scripture leaves no doubt that judgment deals specifically with *human conduct* and *free choices*. God will judge "all people impartially according to their deeds" (1 Peter 1:17). Indeed, God's righteous judgment will be revealed when "he will repay according to each one's deeds" (Romans 2:6).

The most fundamental of these choices or "deeds" is belief in Jesus Christ and the acceptance of the salvation he offers, yet this belief and acceptance are not merely *intellectual* acts of assent. They imply a correspondence to his grace in our lives. James writes that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). Good works, in fact, are the substance and expression of our faith. Faith becomes real, "takes flesh," through our personal decisions and moral choices.

Since God's judgment is just, no one is responsible for what he doesn't know or for what he is incapable of performing. Christian tradition holds that *"Ad impossibilia nemo tenetur"* ("No one is obliged to do the impossible"). We will be judged for our conduct, our behavior, our attitudes, our choices—free, deliberate, *mine*. These are not accidents of birth or ill fortune. To do or not to do, to speak or remain silent, to believe or not to believe, to act or refrain from acting, to trust or to doubt, to attend to or neglect . . . all of these are *my* choices, for which I am accountable. Judgment underscores the importance of good conduct, which in turn underscores the importance of conscience, by which we know what good conduct *is*.

GOOD CONSCIENCE

But the Bible tells us still more about conscience. A Christian is called to act in all sincerity, in the knowledge that God knows and sees all things. We are summoned to act uprightly before God, in full transparency. In short, we must truly *want* to be good. This sincerity before God bears the name of a "good conscience" or "pure conscience." Without this basic moral honesty it is futile to worry about the right workings of conscience. It would be like concern for having a very precise compass when you really have no intention of following it.

"Good conscience" includes two vital dimensions. The first is a heartfelt desire to do the right thing. A person of good conscience isn't looking for an excuse to do his own will, searching for a loophole in the moral law that will permit him to get out of his obligations. A person of good conscience truly wants to please God in everything he does. And because he wants to please God, he ardently desires to know what God wants from him, here and now. With this base, the judgments of conscience in particular matters often hit the mark. Purity of conscience leads to exceptional moral clarity, while without it conscience easily errs. As Jesus states, "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own" (John 7:17). In this case we see that having a good conscience—being resolved to do God's will—leads to interior illumination and discernment.

Second, a good conscience means the awareness of having done one's best. This is a source of immense peace of soul and confidence to stand before God. How beautiful it would be to be able to exclaim, like Paul, **"Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God"** (Acts 23:1). "Conscience" here refers to the state of one's soul before God. A "good conscience" or a "clear conscience" means that even after a careful self- examination one discovers no deliberate evil. True, if our consciences are functioning well we will always find imperfections and areas where we can be more generous, but a clear conscience means a consistently sincere effort to live well. Paul uses a similar expression when he says, "Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people" (Acts 24:16).

Purity of conscience requires a choice, not only of a specific act, but more fundamentally of *whom we will serve*. "No slave can serve two masters," Jesus declares (Luke 16:13). If we wish to serve our unruly passions, the world with its vanities, the demands of our pride and sensuality, *and* Jesus Christ, we will inevitably fail. Moral conscience either reigns supreme or becomes no more than an annoying hindrance to the attainment of our baser aspirations. When the judgment of conscience is downgraded to just one of the factors in making a decision, morality invariably cedes to more pragmatic considerations.

Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Only then will we be able to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). It is the "heart" truly converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good that is really the source of true judgments of conscience. In order to "discern what is the will of God," knowledge of God's law is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient. What is needed is a sort of connaturality between a person and the true good. Such a connaturality develops through the virtuous attitudes of the person himself. This is the meaning of Jesus' saying that "those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3:21). A pure conscience readily discerns the good, just as the pure heart sees God (see Matt. 5:8).

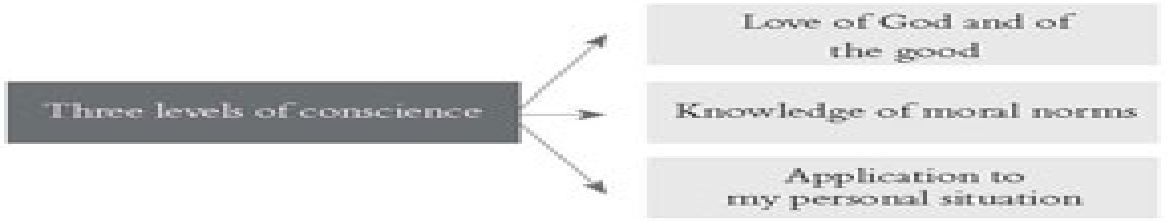
A bad conscience, on the other hand, is not just a conscience that errs. It reflects the hard-heartedness that closes itself off to moral truth. It is voluntary blindness to God's light and deafness to his voice. More than simply "not knowing," a bad conscience implies that we "do not want to know"—perhaps explicitly, perhaps implicitly through a more subtle negligence in investigating what we ought to know. Bad conscience involves a choice not to allow God and his will to guide our actions.

THREE LEVELS OF CONSCIENCE

From the preceding considerations, we can distinguish three separate levels of conscience. Although they are distinct, they relate closely to one another and influence one another. The first, most fundamental level is that which we have just considered: the level of *good conscience*. This primary level involves the firm decision to love God above all things, to *do good* and *avoid evil*. Accepting Christ as the Lord of our lives carries with it an active desire to please him in all things, which means in turn knowing his will. This fundamental decision sets the tone for our consciences and all our moral choices.

The second level of conscience is the knowledge of moral norms and the principles of right conduct. Along with these precepts, this second level entails knowledge of the vices and sins that displease God, as well as the virtues and attitudes that please him most, such as faith, humility, trust, temperance, and so forth. It also means knowing Jesus himself as the model of Christian life.

The third level, finally, comprises the application of both our general disposition toward God and our knowledge of his will to our specific situation. This level, the most proper to conscience, asks, *What would Jesus do? What does God want from me personally, concretely, now?* The third level also includes *self- knowledge*, a clear picture of our actions, motivations, and intentions. We could summarize these three levels graphically as follows:



All three levels are absolutely essential to the good workings of moral conscience. A vague decision to "love God" without an active effort to know what pleases and displeases him leads to an ambiguous, sentimental love that doesn't manifest itself in holiness of life. A true love of God, or at least the *effective desire* to love him, leads to an earnest endeavor to discover his will and to get to know Christ's life as a pattern for our own.

Knowledge of moral norms, on the other hand, is worth little without love of God and a firm resolution to pursue goodness. Without this fundamental motivation we will not apply what we know to our own lives. Either we will experience frustration in knowing what we should be doing without the necessary drive to live accordingly (in which case conscience becomes nothing but a nagging reminder of the life we should be living), or we follow the moral precepts legalistically, without love. In the latter case, more often than not our point of reference will be our own perfection rather than God's glory. This serves us little, puffing up our vanity without effecting any real change on our moral character.

Finally, wanting to be good without a sound knowledge of objective ethical principles results in moral subjectivity, where my moral code is anchored only in personal "insight" and "moral feelings," rather than the solid grounding of God's will for me. In other words, in trying to do the right thing, I will have no sure point of reference. What "feels right" to me becomes more important than God's revelation of his will or the proven principles of the natural law.

For a good moral life, the three levels of conscience must be interlocked. They work together as one, informing and perfecting each other. Love impels us to study, to know, and to apply and provides the further impetus to live according to what we have discovered.

CONSCIENCE AND CONVERSION

Conscience helps not only those who earnestly strive to please God in all things, but also those who sometimes lose sight of God. When we have the misfortune of wandering from the Father's house, preferring our will to God's, conscience does not abandon us. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, who goes out to search for the lost sheep that has strayed away. He often does this through the promptings of conscience. This is, perhaps, the most moving role of conscience, so like Christ who came "to seek out and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). It speaks softly but insistently, testifying to Christ's truth and reminding us of the greatness to which we are called and reminding us of the possibility of forgiveness. Thus, conscience often provides the initial incitement to conversion. Conversion requires convincing of sin; it includes the interior judgment of the conscience.

Blindness to one's own sin and the silence of conscience is a more dangerous sickness of soul than sin itself. If one sins but conscience remains intact, one has the necessary tools to recognize one's error and turn to the Lord in repentance and sorrow, sure of receiving forgiveness. Yet when one fails to recognize one's own faults, this path of conversion is closed off to him. He is further removed from truth and goodness than the one who fell.

The tremendous evil of blindness to one's own guilt comes across with great force in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14). In the end the self-righteous man comes out as the one who is truly lost. The tax collector with all his undisputed sins stands more justified before God than the Pharisee with all his undeniably good works. Jesus does not downplay the weight of sin and evil, or the importance of moral goodness. Rather he underscores the need for all to take stock of their moral guilt and to ask for God's mercy in all humility. The Pharisee, despite the good works he lists off, also has sin for which he needs forgiveness, yet he is blind to this need. He sees only his goodness and no longer recognizes his need for mercy. His "clear conscience" masks a situation of objective wrong to which he is blind. It forms an impenetrable shell that deafens him to God's voice.

The publican, on the other hand, suffers under the cries of conscience that convict him of sin. But this suffering is blessed and moves him to seek the forgiveness of God. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Through his conscience, the publican is in touch with God's truth, the truth about his own moral evil and neediness. Jesus communicates effectively with sinners, since their acknowledgement of wrongdoing opens them to conversion. The self- righteous, who believe they have no need of conversion, are shielded from grace.

Guilt alone—the knowledge of our sin—does not purify. Good conscience does not redeem man but opens him up to redemption. When I feel bad, rather than trying to eliminate the guilty feelings, I should seek to rectify the *cause* of those feelings—to set things right again. This involves personal effort, but above all it involves God's forgiveness. Grace is already active when conscience recognizes our *failures* to follow God's will, but conscience also points us to the need for grace, for a forgiveness we cannot bestow on ourselves.

Therefore, a troubled conscience is not the finish line but the starting gate. It is an invitation to self-examination, to repentance, to conversion, to recourse to God's pardon. Conscience does not merely *recognize* our wrongdoing; it *incites* us to sorrow, remorse, contrition, and compunction. More than mere guilt, or simple regret at the way things are, it moves us to set things straight. In the end, conscience prods us to seek forgiveness from God. The Letter to the Hebrews assures us that if the blood of goats and bulls was able to purify the flesh of the defiled, "how much more will the blood of Christ . . . purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!" (Heb. 9:13–14).

Conversion comprises three important moments, or stages, exemplified in the parable of the prodigal son (**Luke 15:11–32**). Far from the Father's house, the son experiences the inner workings of conscience. **First, the son "came to himself."** This refers to the awakening of conscience, which leads to reflection and self- examination. "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!" (Luke 15:17).

Next comes the decision to ask forgiveness and to change, sometimes called a "firm purpose of amendment." The prodigal son says: "I will get up and go to my father." Acknowledgement of sin remains sterile if not accompanied by a real decision to change, with God's grace. To simply realize that we are lying in the mud doesn't help much, unless we decide to grasp the hand that offers to pull us out.

Finally, we have the confession of sin and the pardon God freely gives. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:18). Recognition of sin means more that realizing we have made mistakes; it means realizing that we have offended a Father who loves us, and deserves better. Again, this blessed journey begins with the insistent prodding of conscience that obliges us to confront the moral truth of our lives.

These brief reflections, while not nearly exhausting the biblical teaching on conscience, should at least give us a point of departure and some basic principles to work with. We have seen that there is an objective standard for right and wrong, that knowledge is essential for moral action, that our knowledge is imperfect and needs divine illumination, that moral precepts require the mediation of conscience, that conscience begins with love of God and a sincere pursuit of goodness, and that conversion and repentance begin with the prodding of conscience.[7]

[7] Williams, T. (2008). *Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.

THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE

What Conscience Does . . . and Doesn't Do

As marvelous as conscience is, it cannot do everything. Some would like to assign a nearly omnipotent role to conscience, as if it were responsible for all our decisions and choices, and even the moral law itself, but this is far from the case. The acts of conscience are properly called *judgments*, not *decisions*. In reality our consciences *decide* nothing. When I think about telling a lie as a way out of an embarrassing situation, my conscience *judges* my proposed action in the light of moral truths, but it doesn't "decide" what the right thing is. As much as I would like to write my own moral law sometimes, that would be beyond the competence of conscience. In fact, even if I *tried* to create my own moral law, my conscience would judge that attempt itself as something morally reprehensible.

Decisions, on the other hand, are different from judgments. When conscience provides moral guidance and promptings, I must then *decide* whether to heed it or not. In other words, conscience counsels, guides, and urges, but in the end, we must decide whether to listen to it or ignore it.

Conscience does not create the law and does not dictate right and wrong but testifies to a moral truth that transcends it. A simple way to look at this distinction is by comparing it to the division of powers in a government. We have the legislative branch, which sets forth laws, the judicial branch, which judges people's behavior by the law, and the executive branch, which enforces the laws. By this analogy, conscience would represent the judicial branch of government. It doesn't make the laws, since it isn't a legislator. It doesn't enforce them, since it doesn't have this power. It merely *judges* our activity according to a law that it didn't create and urges us to behave well.

We are called to live up to a moral ideal that is given to us. That is why conscience can become so uncomfortable. Unlike our decisions, the judgments of conscience don't directly depend on our free will. Conscience evaluates our actions whether we like it or not. How does this work? What mechanisms are involved in the judgment of conscience?

BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER

Three technical words are frequently applied to the judgment of conscience. Moral philosophers often distinguish among *antecedent, concomitant*, and *consequent* conscience. These erudite terms refer to the *what* and especially the *when* of conscience.

ANTECEDENT CONSCIENCE

Antecedent conscience comes into play *prior* to our actions, evaluating the moral quality of what we propose to do. It assesses our plans and then warns or encourages, commands or forbids. The antecedent role of conscience carries special importance since it exercises influence over my actions rather than simply evaluating them once they are performed.

CONCOMITANT CONSCIENCE

Concomitant conscience judges my actions *in the moment* I carry them out. *Concomitant* means *simultaneous* and refers to the conscience's moral appraisal of my actions that accompanies the actions themselves.

Once again the principal act of conscience is moral *judgment*, and this judgment extends beyond the single action itself to the moral agent, that is, to me—the one performing the action. Not only is the *action* right or wrong, *I* am right or wrong to carry it out. Conscience approves or condemns, testifying to the moral law and to God's will for me.

CONSEQUENT CONSCIENCE

Finally, *consequent conscience* judges my actions *after* I have brought them about. Looking back on what I have done, conscience censures me if I have done wrong, and I often feel an accompanying sense of guilt. Conscience bears witness to what I have done or failed to do and calls my actions up before my eyes. If I have done well, conscience lauds my efforts and I often experience an interior peace for having used my freedom well. Again, conscience applies general principles to my specific actions.

These three categories of conscience can be graphically represented as follows:

	Before	**During**	**After**
	(Antecedent)	(Concomitant)	(Consequent)
Good action	Commands	Approves	Praises
Bad action	Forbids	Censures	Reproaches

CONSCIENCE AS A HERALD

Conscience has no authority of itself but carries moral weight because it testifies to a higher moral truth. Conscience speaks for Another. If conscience were just a passing whim or a personal opinion, it might be interesting, but it would not be *authoritative*. We could rightly heed or ignore it. Yet we find that this is not the case. When conscience speaks, it does not offer suggestions; it passes judgments and issues commands. It is the witness of God himself, who knows our inmost being, our deepest thoughts, motivations, and intentions.

Conscience involves both dialogue with oneself and dialogue with God, who is the Author of the moral law. It is he who calls us to fidelity. Because conscience entails dialogue, it also entails listening and opening ourselves up to God's voice. For this reason conscience has also been rightly called an inner "sanctuary" where God speaks to man in the depths of his heart. Since God is the Author of both the moral law and human reason, the two walk hand in hand and confirm one another. Our reason acknowledges the goodness of what the law commands.

Christians benefit from the clear teaching of God's Word, whose authority they acknowledge. But nonbelievers have a conscience as well, and they, too, have access to the moral law. God has written a law on the human heart, a law man discovers but did not create (Romans 2:14–15).

HOW CONSCIENCE CAN ERR

If conscience is God's herald, we could logically suppose that it is right. I think we have already established that this cannot be so, since many people "acting in conscience" do things that are manifestly wrong and often hurt others or themselves. Are they lying when they claim to be following conscience? Perhaps sometimes, but not necessarily.

Let's take a look at the ways and reasons conscience can err.

A POORLY FORMED CONSCIENCE

As our Creator, God is the Author of human reason; yet human reason is fallible. Just as we can make mistakes in our mathematical calculations so, too, we can in our moral judgments. Since conscience is simply the mind thinking morally, it can err the same way our mind errs in other areas. Sometimes this is because one's conscience is poorly formed. It is possible, for example, for a child to be brought up with a false sense of values regarding some important moral questions. Like a deformed eye, a poorly formed conscience judges evil to be good and good to be evil.

FAULTY APPLICATION OF VALUES

Even if a person has a sound set of values, he can make a mistake in *applying* his principles to a particular action. The mind can think well or badly. Because conscience is a human and imperfect judgment, it needs to be instructed—and sometimes corrected.

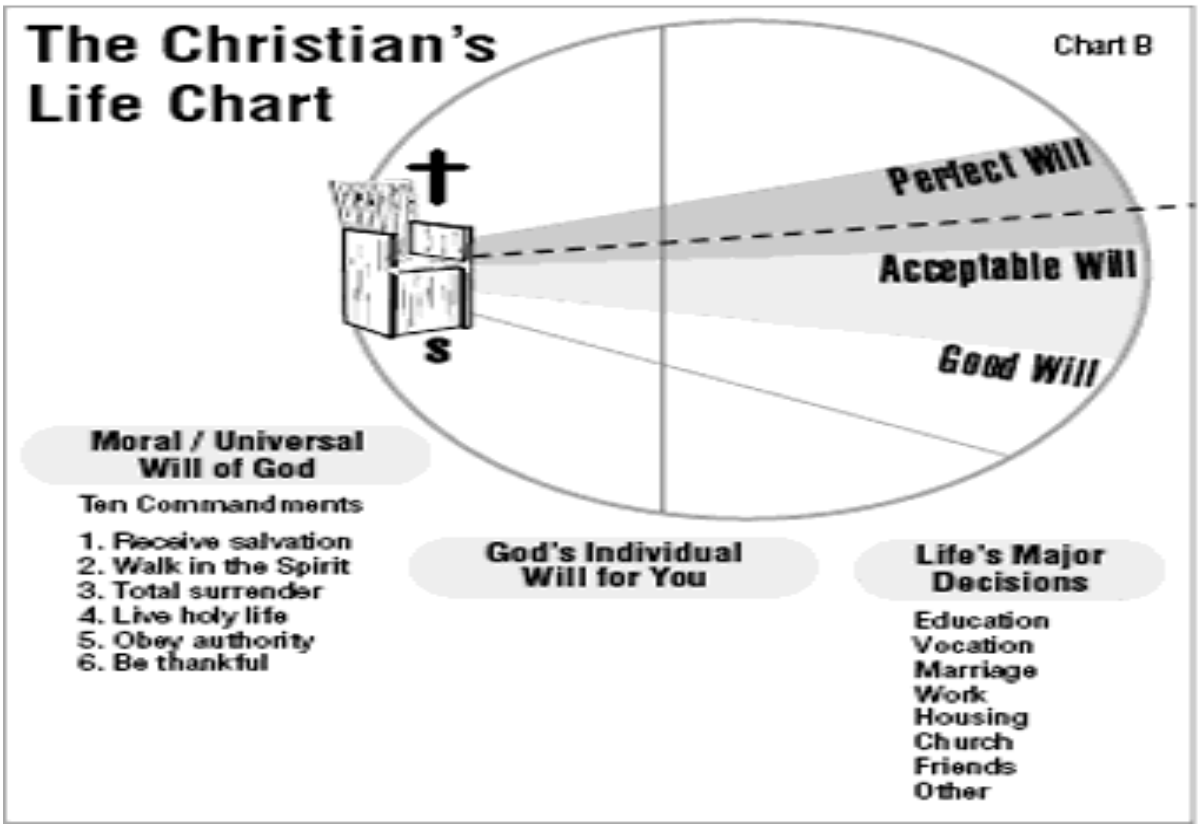
CONSCIENCE USED IMPROPERLY

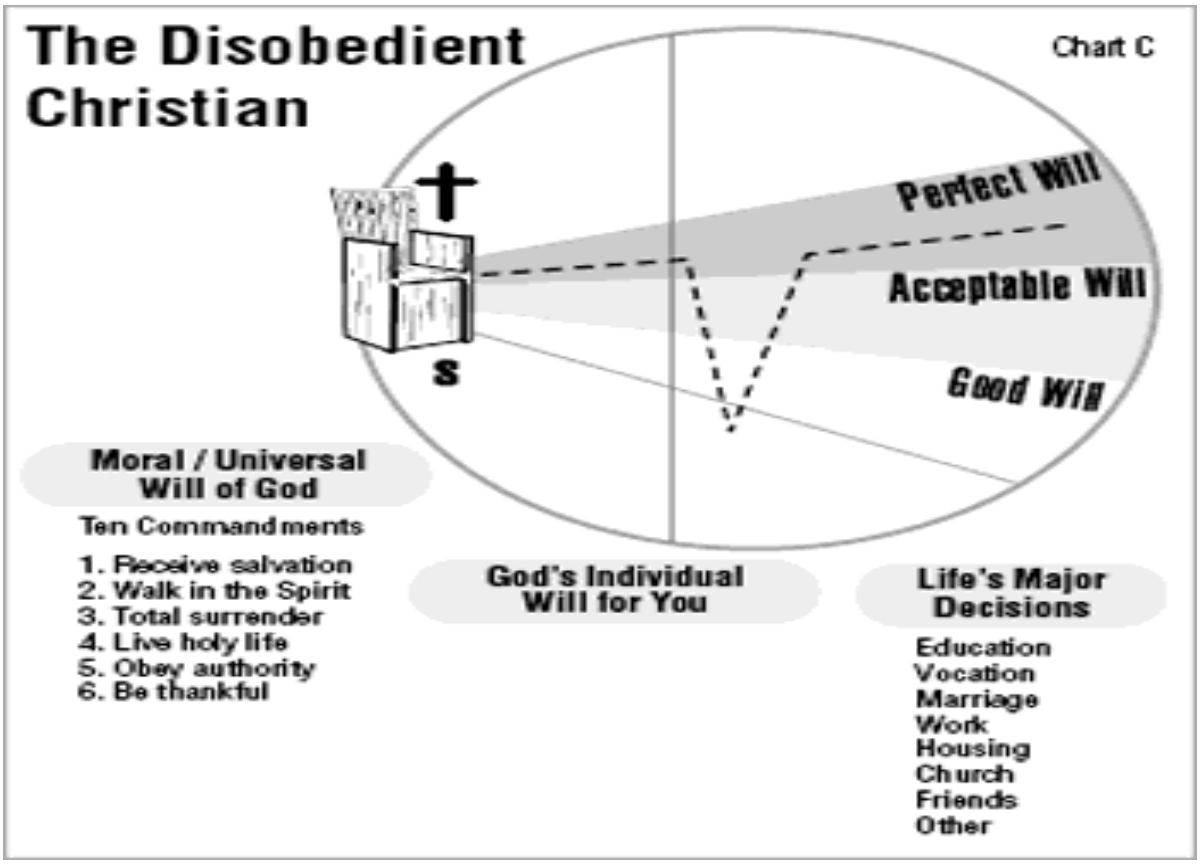
Moreover, like reason, conscience is an instrument or *tool*. A tool will render good results only when wielded properly. For a tool to yield the results we hope for, two things are needed. First, the tool itself must be working properly. As a tool, our consciences must be in good working order, trained in their knowledge of good and evil, if they are to provide good moral judgments. Second, to be effective a good tool must be *used well*. Conscience, as we saw earlier, supposes an underlying intention to be good. If, deep down, we don't want to do the right thing, conscience won't be very effective.

THE OBLIGATION OF CONSCIENCE

Often when we think of conscience, we think primarily of its *negative* role. As a sort of inner policeman, it keeps us from overstepping ethical boundaries and blows the whistle when it catches us doing wrong. Yet this is only half the story. Conscience also has an eminently positive role in the moral life.[8]

[8] Williams, T. (2008). *Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.


The Christian's Life Chart
Chart B
Perfect Will
Acceptable Will
Good Will
S
Moral / Universal Will of God
Ten Commandments
1. Receive salvation
2. Walk in the Spirit
3. Total surrender
4. Live holy life
5. Obey authority
6. Be thankful
God's Individual Will for You
Life's Major Decisions
Education
Vocation
Marriage
Work
Housing
Church
Friends
Other


The Disobedient Christian
Chart C
Perfect Will
Acceptable Will
Good Will
S
Moral / Universal Will of God
Ten Commandments
1. Receive salvation
2. Walk in the Spirit
3. Total surrender
4. Live holy life
5. Obey authority
6. Be thankful
God's Individual Will for You
Life's Major Decisions
Education
Vocation
Marriage
Work
Housing
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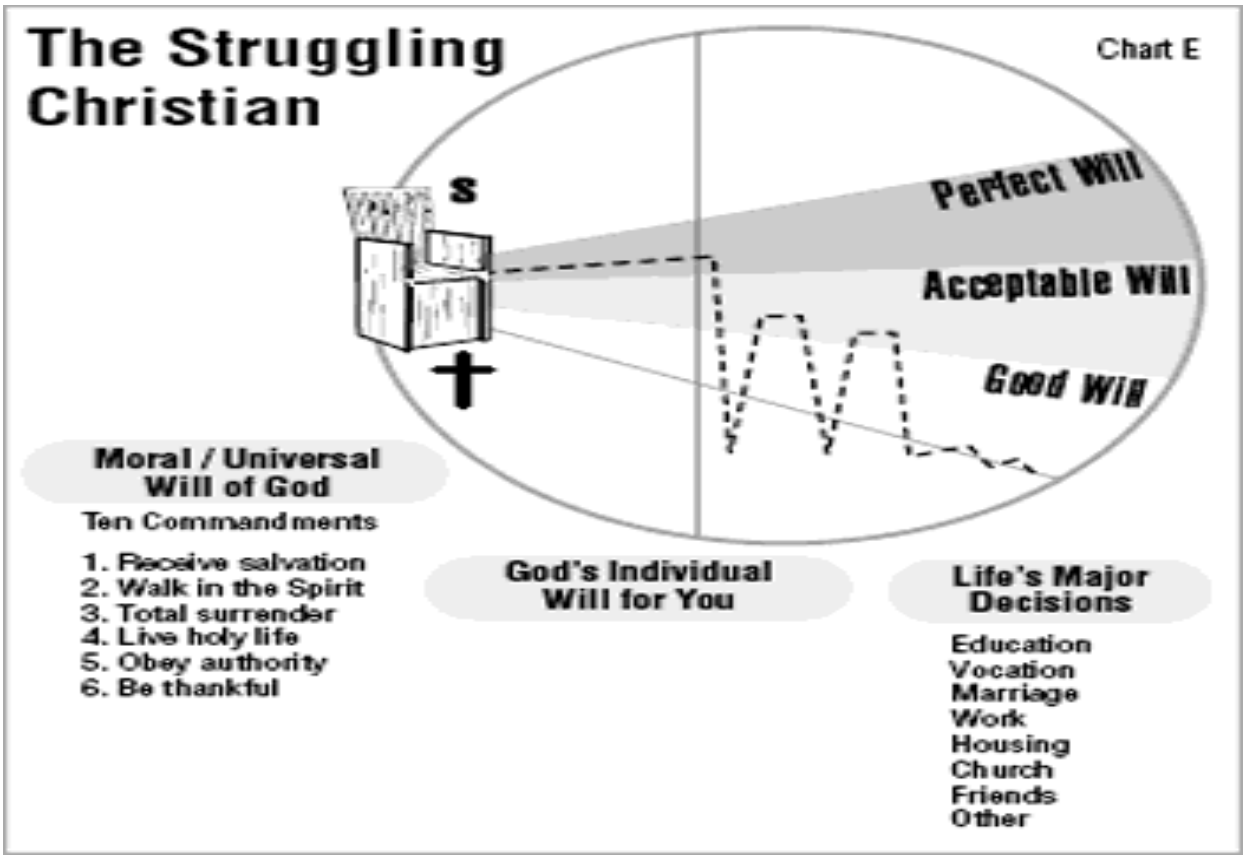
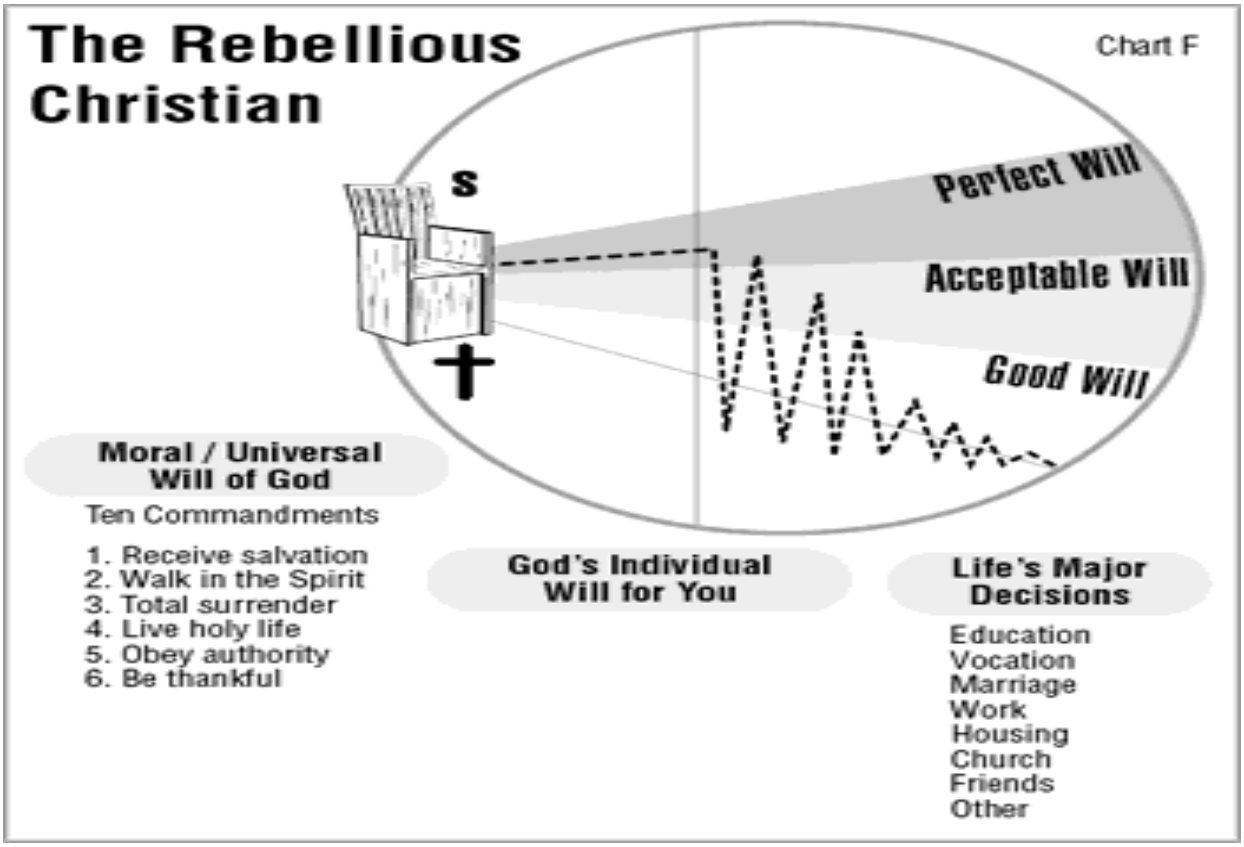
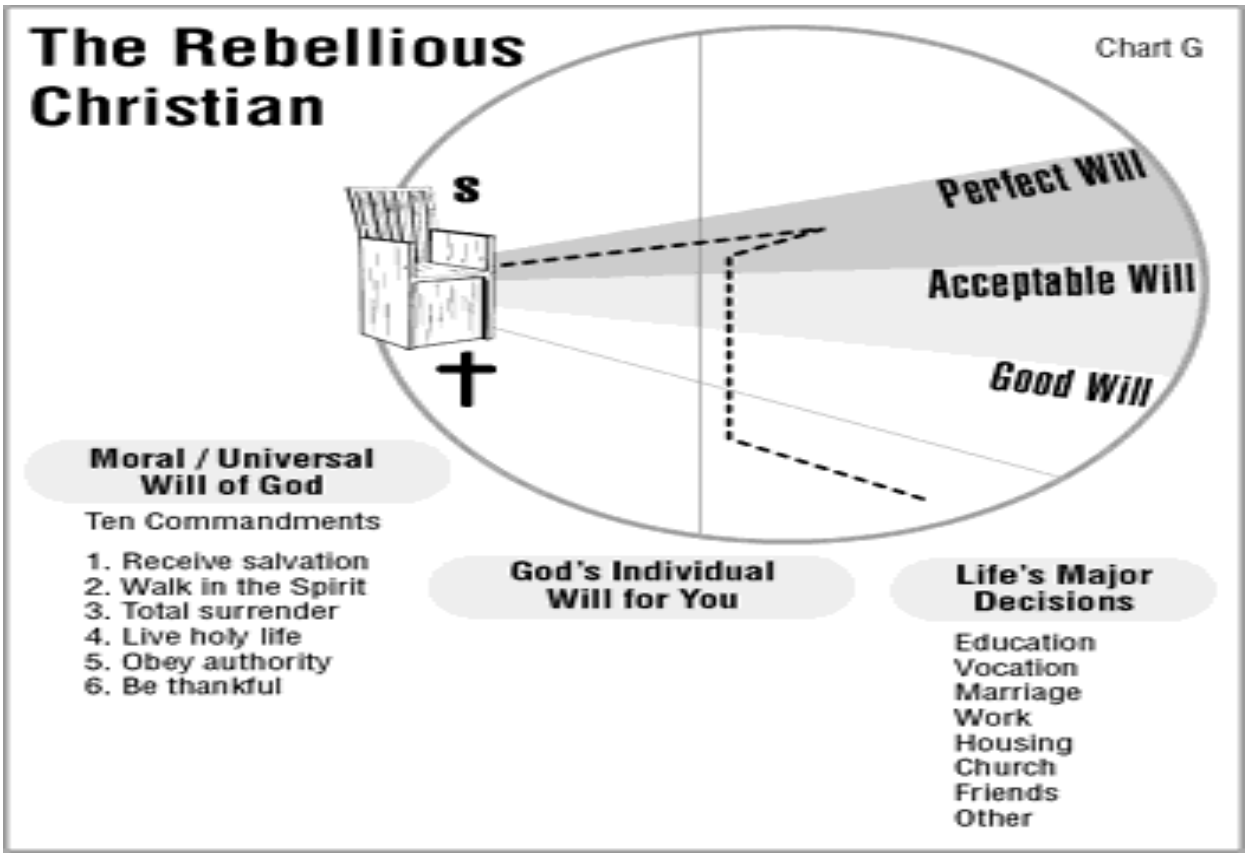
Friends
Other


The Struggling Christian
Chart E
S
Perfect Will
Acceptable Will
Good Will
Moral / Universal Will of God
Ten Commandments
1. Receive salvation
2. Walk in the Spirit
3. Total surrender
4. Live holy life
5. Obey authority
6. Be thankful
God's Individual Will for You
Life's Major Decisions
Education
Vocation
Marriage
Work
Housing
Church
Friends
Other


The Rebellious Christian
Chart F
S
Perfect Will
Acceptable Will
Good Will
Moral / Universal Will of God
Ten Commandments
1. Receive salvation
2. Walk in the Spirit
3. Total surrender
4. Live holy life
5. Obey authority
6. Be thankful
God's Individual Will for You
Life's Major Decisions
Education
Vocation
Marriage
Work
Housing
Church
Friends
Other


The Rebellious Christian
Chart G
S
Perfect Will
Acceptable Will
Good Will
Moral / Universal Will of God
Ten Commandments
1. Receive salvation
2. Walk in the Spirit
3. Total surrender
4. Live holy life
5. Obey authority
6. Be thankful
God's Individual Will for You
Life's Major Decisions
Education
Vocation
Marriage
Work
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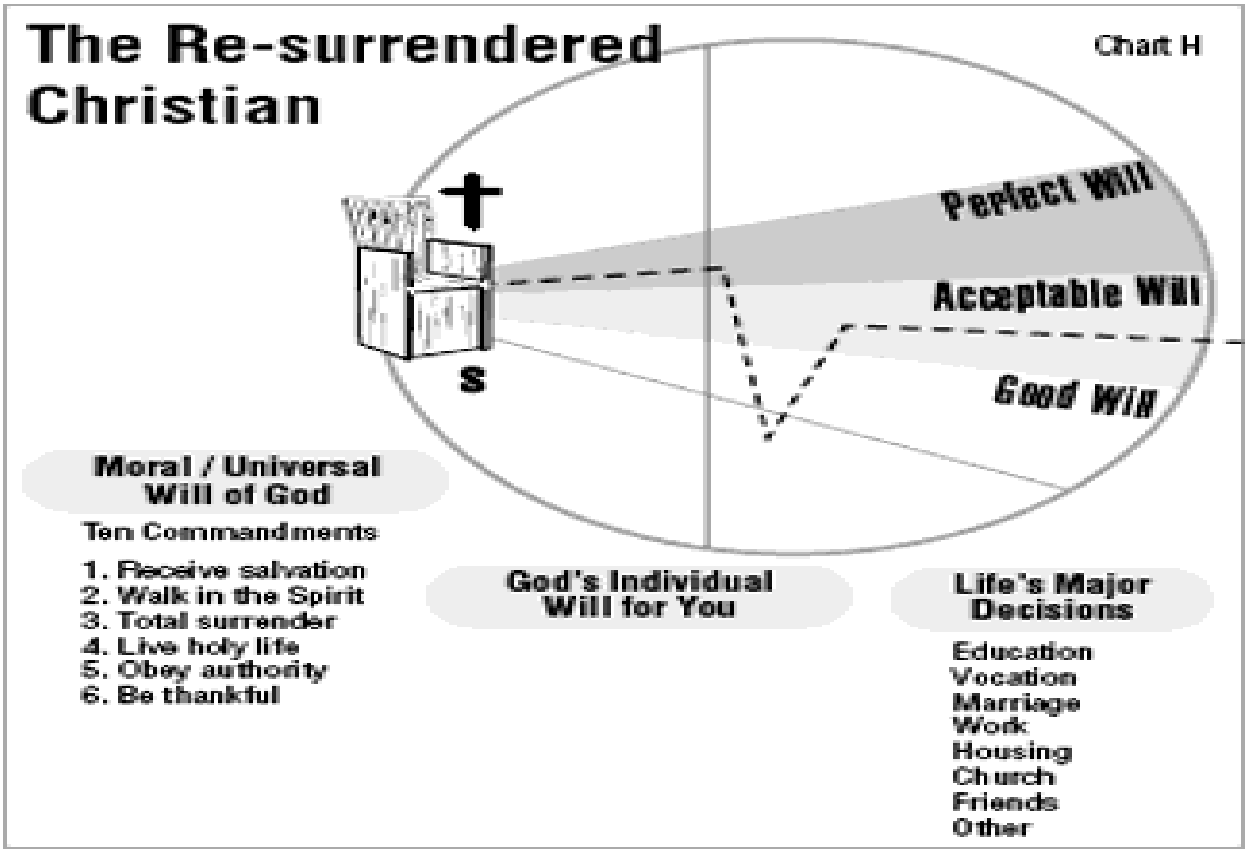
Friends
Other


The Re-surrendered Christian
Chart H
Perfect Will
Acceptable Will
Good Will
S
Moral / Universal Will of God
Ten Commandments
1. Receive salvation
2. Walk in the Spirit
3. Total surrender
4. Live holy life
5. Obey authority
6. Be thankful
God's Individual Will for You
Life's Major Decisions
Education
Vocation
Marriage
Work
Housing
Church
Friends
Other

COACH OR REFEREE?

The Motivating Role of Conscience

Conscience is most often associated with moral restraint. Socrates, for example, spoke of his *daemon* as a restrainer rather than a promoter of action. Some of the most poignant examples from great literature paint conscience in this light. Think, for instance, of Edgar Allan Poe's "Telltale Heart," in which a guilty conscience gnaws so desperately at the killer that, despite his perfectly executed plan, he ends up turning himself in. Think, too, of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, or Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, or any number of other classic works where conscience is portrayed especially as a persistent and intransigent reminder of moral guilt.

Is conscience, then, only the awareness that we have done wrong? Judgment of *past actions* forms just a part of the activity of conscience. The most important role is that of antecedent conscience, which urges and compels us to act in a certain way. Prior to our actions it can *command*, *forbid*, or *permit*, depending on whether the action we are contemplating is right, wrong, or morally indifferent. In this antecedent function, conscience is not only on the lookout for evil; more importantly, it encourages us to do good, to seek perfection in all we do.

Just as the moral life means more than coloring within the lines, so conscience means more than making sure we keep the rules. An ethics limited to the avoidance of evil may be little more than an excuse to live selfishly, expecting nothing from others and offering nothing in return. As C. S. Lewis wisely observed in *Letters to an American Lady*: "Nothing gives one a more spuriously good conscience than keeping rules, even if there has been a total absence of all real charity and faith." We are called to more than rule-observance, and right conscience does more than alert us to evil.

Conscience, then, has an important role of approving, instigating, and inspiring us to positive action. This positive role of conscience is not exhausted in urging us to fulfill our obligations. It pushes us beyond strict obligation toward an *ideal*. True, obligation is a key concept when it comes to morality, but doing the right thing goes much farther. Actions may be bad, acceptable, good, or excellent, with plenty of grey area in between. Conscience urges the good person to generosity beyond the minimum required.

In this sense, too, the subjectivity of conscience becomes evident. We have insisted on the important *objective* dimension of morality. Right and wrong are not human inventions. Yet the *subjective* aspect is deeply important as well. Universal moral norms necessarily describe obligations that are common to all and are generally expressed in prohibitions. *Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not commit adultery . . .* The range of possibilities for doing good, however, is much vaster than this: *Love one another as I have loved you . . .* Conscience invites us to climb higher, according to the gifts received and our real possibilities of doing good.

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THE URGE TO DO GOOD

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter characterizes Jesus' life with the simple phrase: "He went about doing good" (Acts 10:38 rsv). Jesus didn't conceive of his mission as an endeavor to avoid evil. He had come to earth for a reason: to achieve our salvation. By the same token, he sends his followers out with a mission: to do good, to evangelize, to bear witness to him. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21 rsv). A good Christian conscience will help us embrace the mission to which we have been called and carry it out with perfection.
In Jesus' description of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25), all the nations appear before the judgment seat of God, where Christ separates them as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Those on his right are rewarded with eternal life, while those on his left are sentenced to eternal fire. From a moral perspective, the striking feature of this judgment scene is the kind of behavior being evaluated. It seems, in fact, that the reason for this judgment has little to do with the *evil* done or avoided, and more with the *good* achieved or neglected. The damned are not taken to task for their fornications, murders, extortions, and drunkenness, nor are the blessed praised for avoiding such misdeeds. The blessed are received into the kingdom because of their works of charity for their neighbors (giving food and drink, clothing, visiting, consoling), which Jesus takes as done to himself.

Other gospel parables reiterate the same message. The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), and the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30) all speak of the Christian obligation to bear fruit and not merely to "follow rules." The parable of the talents is especially illustrative. A man leaving on a journey calls his servants and entrusts his property to them during his absence, to one servant five talents, to another two, and to the third, one. The first two servants trade with the talents received and double them, whereas the third buries the money. On the master's return he demands an account of their stewardship and praises the first two servants for their trustworthiness, giving them further responsibilities and inviting them to "enter into the joy of your master" (vv. 21, 23 rsv). On seeing that the third servant made no return on the money entrusted to him, the master censures him for his laziness and has him cast out into the "outer darkness" (v. 30 rsv).

Once again the contrast in conduct centers on positive fruitfulness versus barrenness, here represented by yielding a profit through industrious trading versus burying one's money and returning it intact but without further yield. The moral message stresses both the fact of stewardship, and the obligation to bear fruit through industry and ingenuity. The parable clarifies that rendering an account for what one has received means more than restoring it safely to its rightful owner; it involves showing an *increase*. Although specific gifts vary both in quantity and kind, responsibility for productivity and multiplication is demanded of all. One is required to yield in proportion to the gifts one has received.

<u>If the Christian mission is essentially proactive, then the role of conscience will center on spurring Christians on to greater self- giving and fruitfulness. The exhortation to "keep the faith" doesn't mean burying it! It means sharing it. If we are called not only to "play by the rules," but to "score goals," then our consciences will more closely resemble an inspiring coach than a meticulous referee.</u>

LEGALISM VERSUS LOVE

A positive view of conscience helps to overcome an ugly moral legalism that sometimes threatens the Christian life. Those who truly love God could never be satisfied with "keeping their consciences clean." When you love someone, you are not content with not offending them, you want to do more. Think, for example, of a mother caring for her sick child whom she loves. How would you characterize her "morality"? She is not concerned with merely doing her "duty" or fulfilling her parental obligations. She is not thinking, *What am I absolutely required to do for my child in this situation?* No! Motivated by love, she doesn't want to know the minimum she is *obliged* to do, but rather the maximum she *can* do for the good of her child. She looks for the most competent doctor, consults other parents, obtains the most effective medicines, and is even ready to give her own blood if necessary. Why? Because she is motivated by love and not merely by obligation.

For those who want to love God authentically, for those who really want to be the best they can be, conscience is an invaluable guide for choosing the path of greater love and self- giving. It reminds us when we have let up in the pursuit of our ideal and encourages us to tend ever higher. Few writers have expressed the power of love better than Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ*:

> Love is a great thing, greatest of all goods, because it alone renders light every burden and bears without distinction every misfortune. Because it carries a burden without feeling it, and renders sweet and pleasing every bitterness. When fatigued it does not become tired; when pressed it does not work through constraint; when threatened it is not disturbed; but like a lively flame and a burning torch, it mounts upwards and securely overcomes all opposition.

In short, for those who live by love rather than by legalism, conscience provides a sure orientation for the right use of freedom. It pushes us not with threats of punishment but with the interior motivation of a loving heart.[9]

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[9] Williams, T. (2008). *Knowing right from wrong: a christian guide to conscience*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.

TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY

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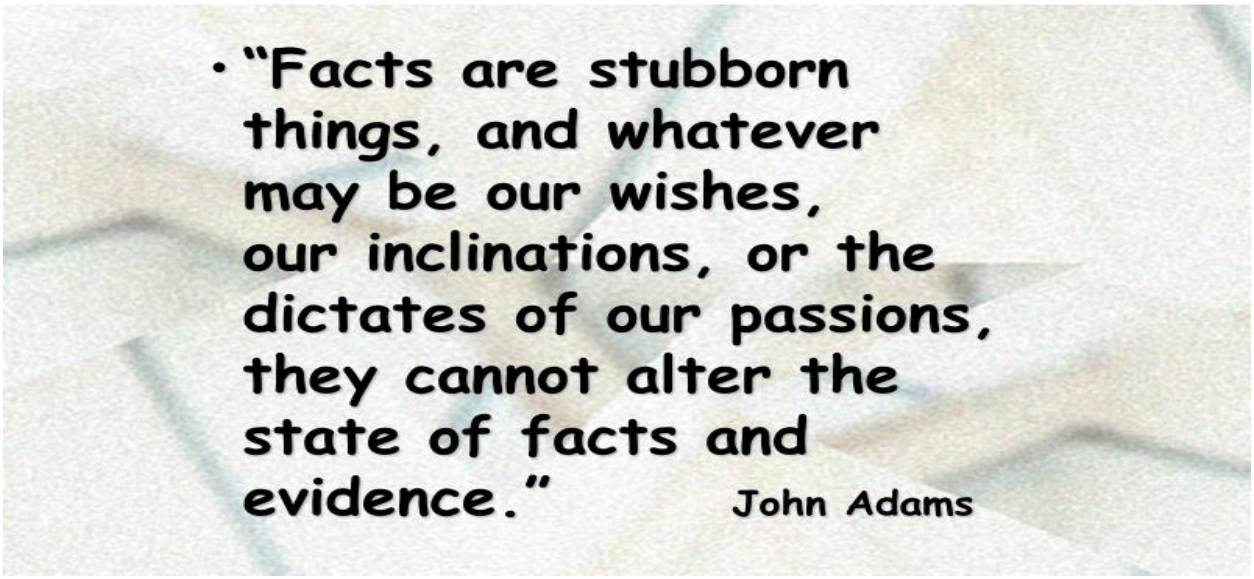
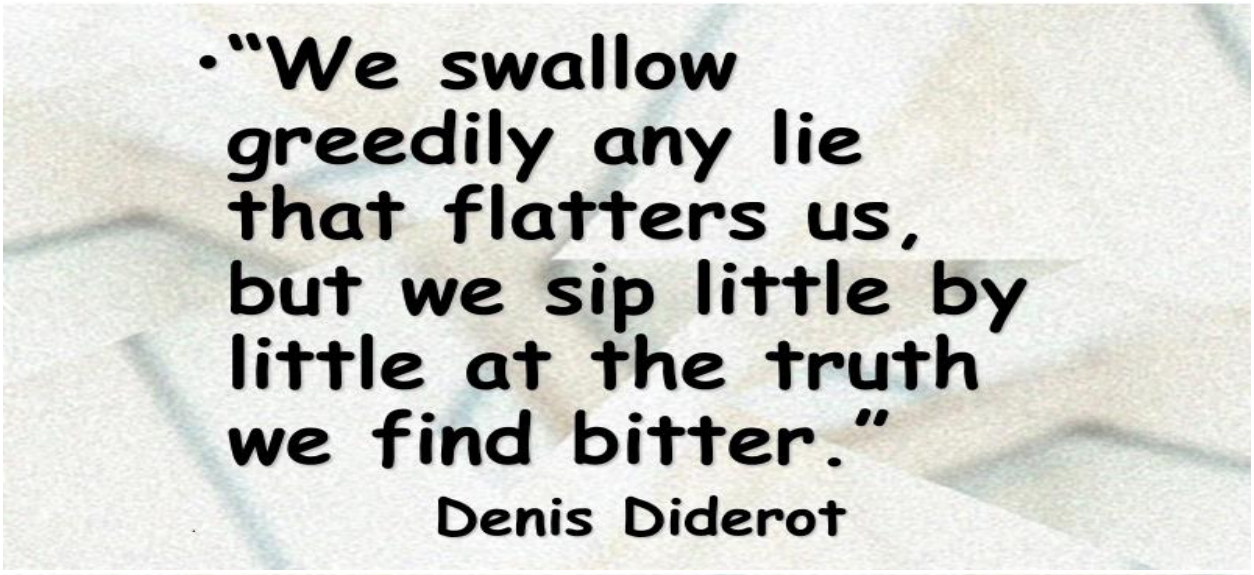
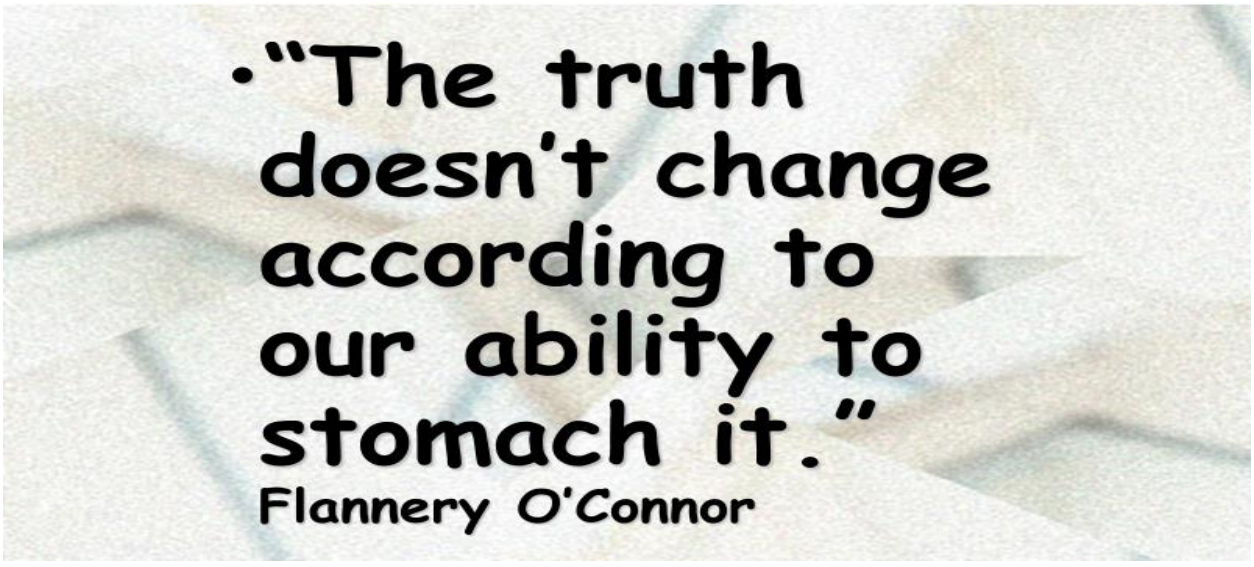
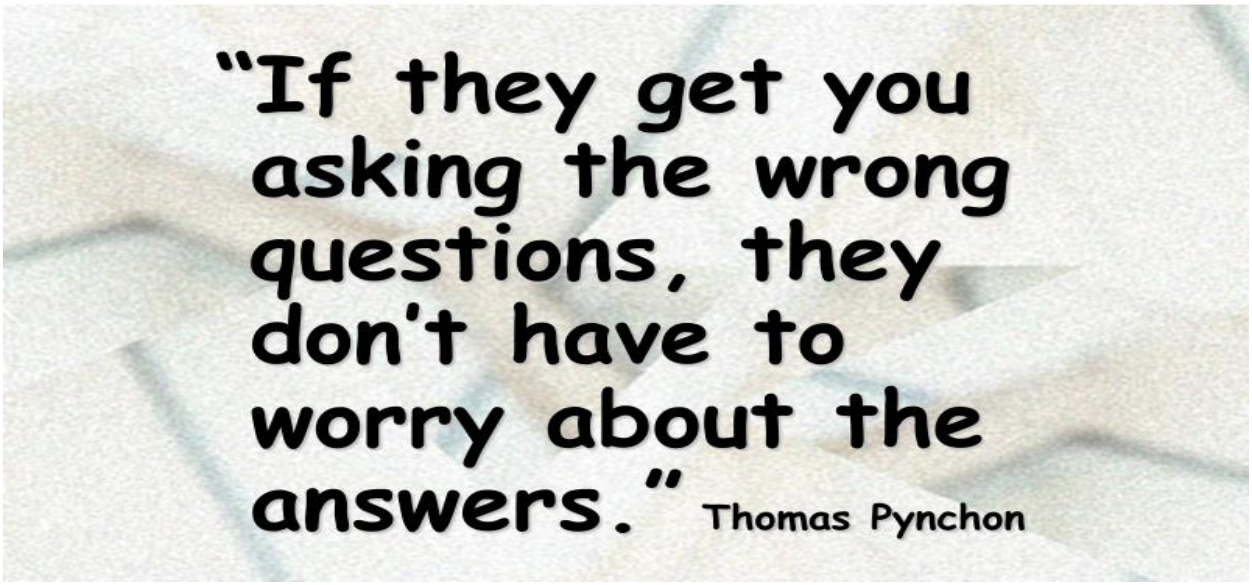
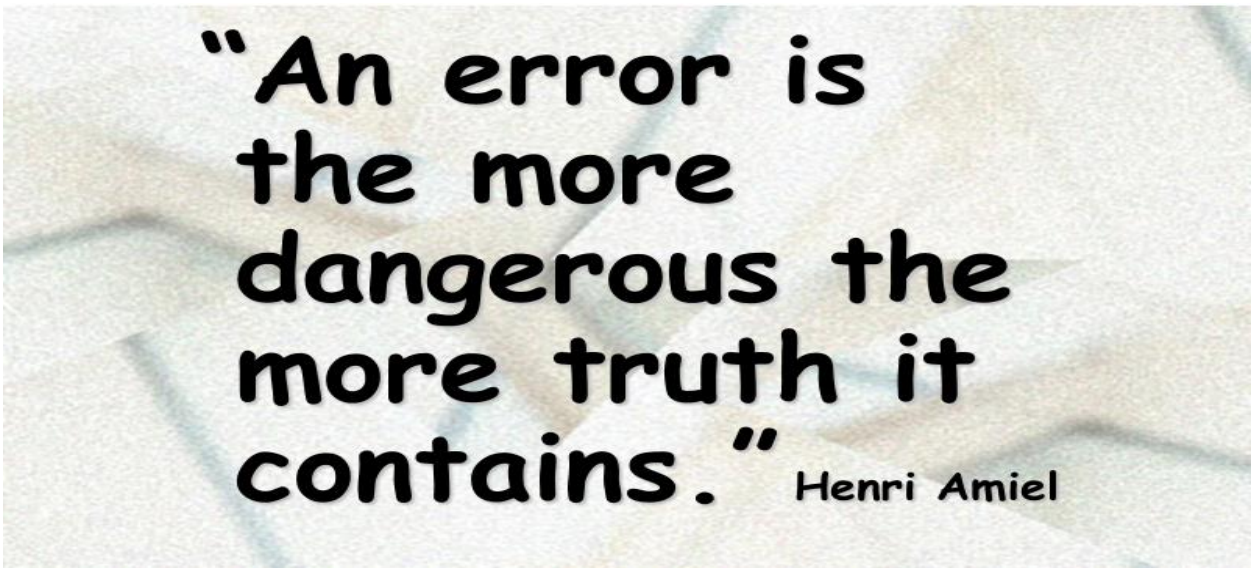
DEALING WITH DICHOTOMY

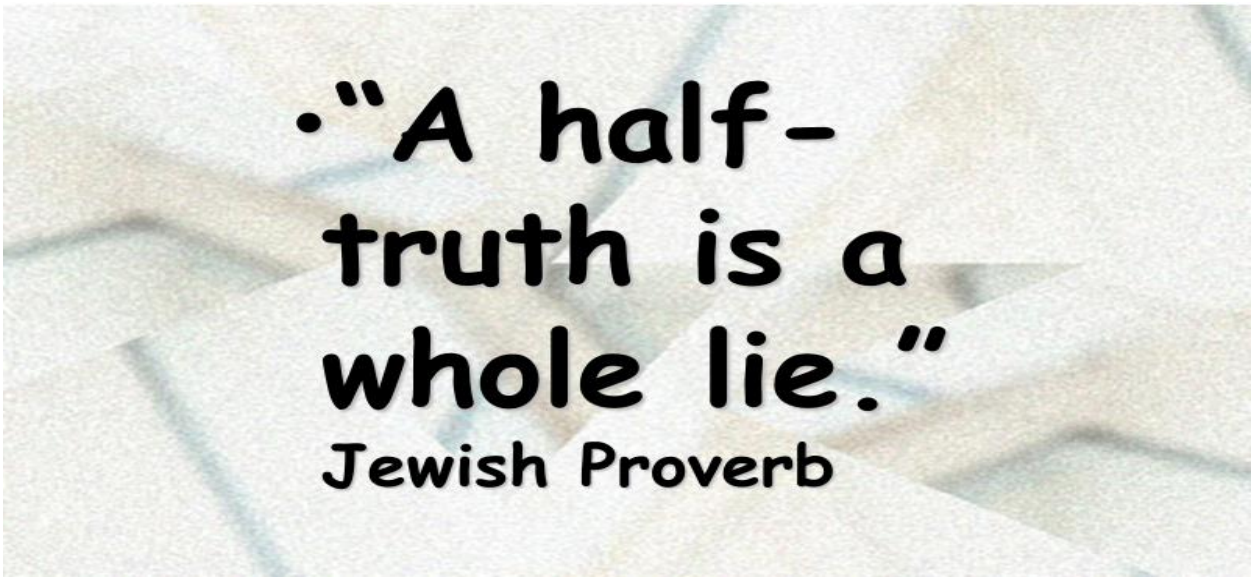

• "Facts are stubborn things, and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." John Adams

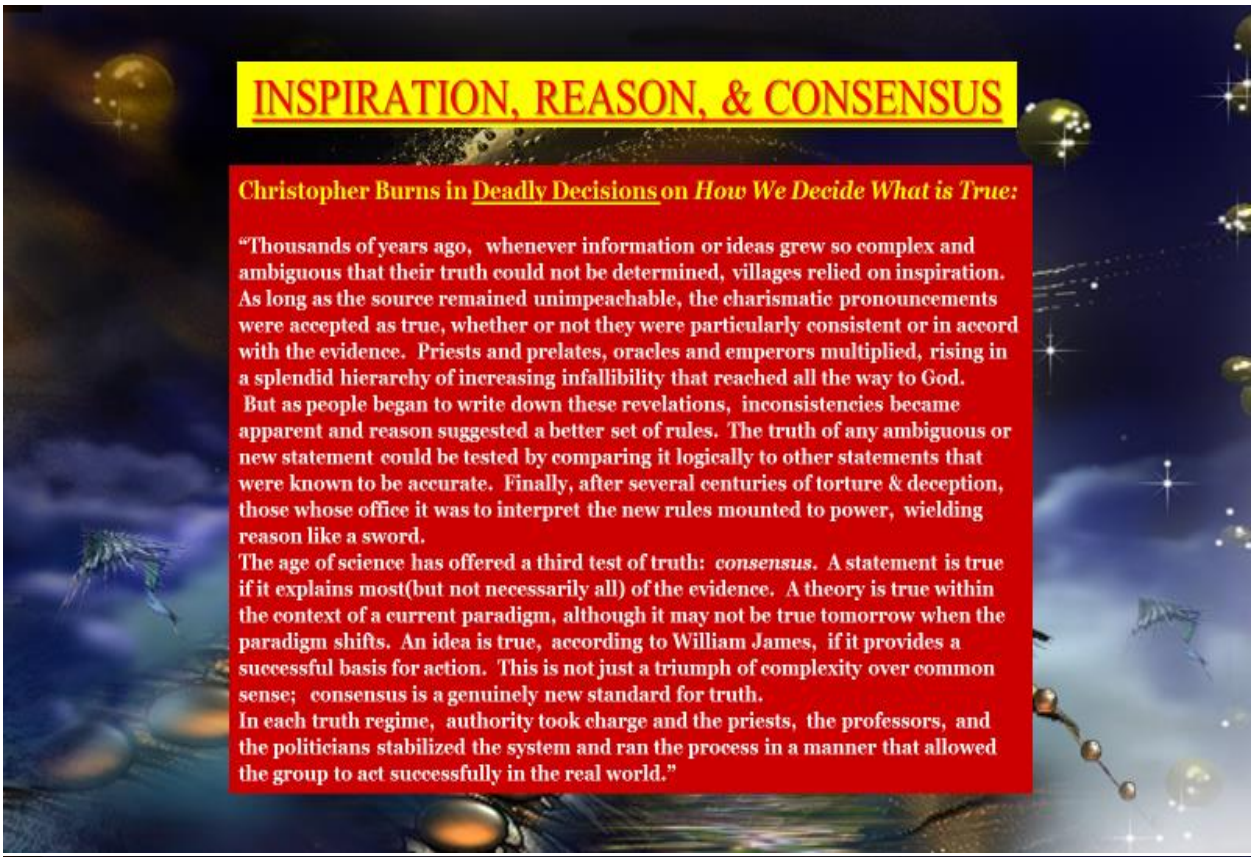

• "We swallow greedily any lie that flatters us, but we sip little by little at the truth we find bitter."
Denis Diderot

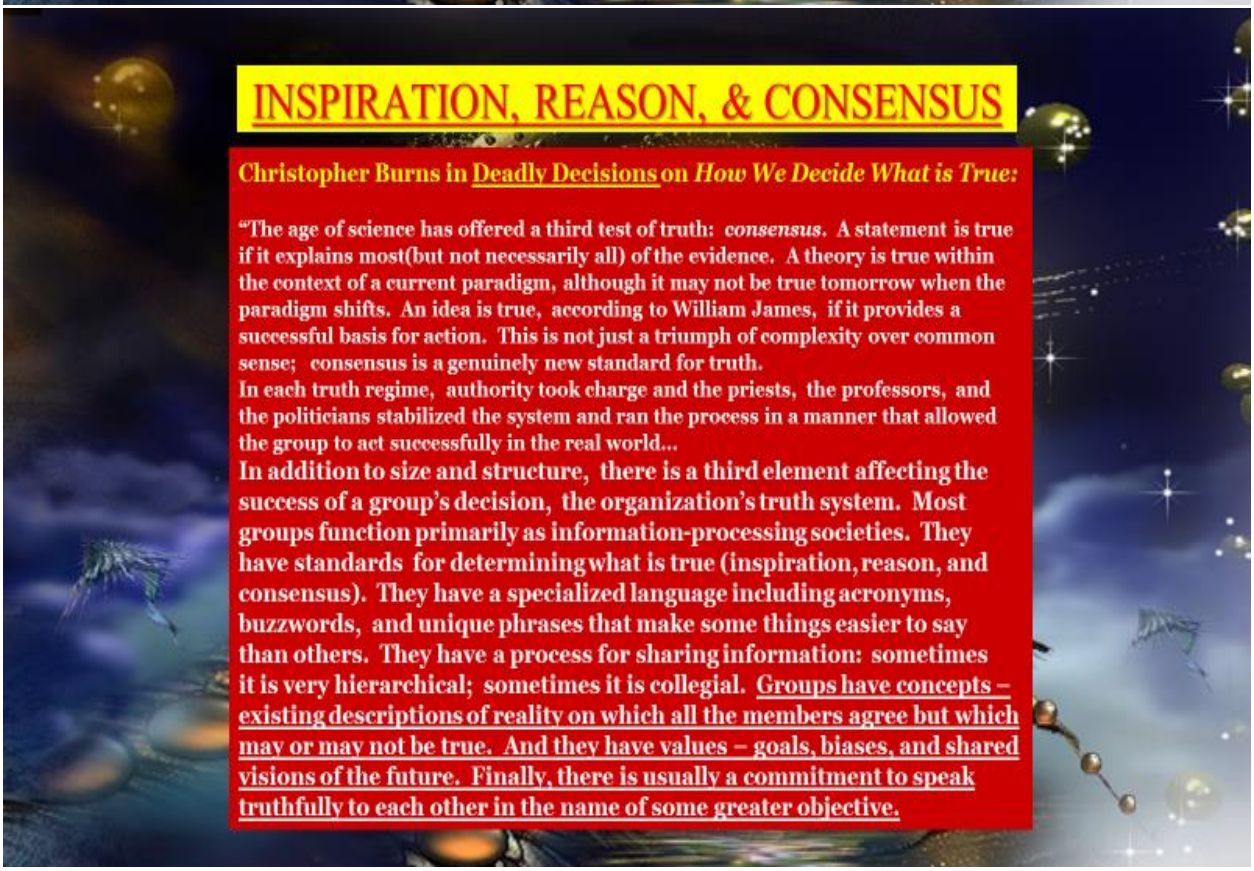

• "The truth doesn't change according to our ability to stomach it."
Flannery O'Connor


"If they get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers." Thomas Pynchon


"An error is the more dangerous the more truth it contains." Henri Amiel


•"A half-truth is a whole lie."
Jewish Proverb


INSPIRATION, REASON, & CONSENSUS
Christopher Burns in Deadly Decisions on How We Decide What is True:
"Thousands of years ago, whenever information or ideas grew so complex and ambiguous that their truth could not be determined, villages relied on inspiration. As long as the source remained unimpeachable, the charismatic pronouncements were accepted as true, whether or not they were particularly consistent or in accord with the evidence. Priests and prelates, oracles and emperors multiplied, rising in a splendid hierarchy of increasing infallibility that reached all the way to God.
But as people began to write down these revelations, inconsistencies became apparent and reason suggested a better set of rules. The truth of any ambiguous or new statement could be tested by comparing it logically to other statements that were known to be accurate. Finally, after several centuries of torture & deception, those whose office it was to interpret the new rules mounted to power, wielding reason like a sword.
The age of science has offered a third test of truth: consensus. A statement is true if it explains most(but not necessarily all) of the evidence. A theory is true within the context of a current paradigm, although it may not be true tomorrow when the paradigm shifts. An idea is true, according to William James, if it provides a successful basis for action. This is not just a triumph of complexity over common sense; consensus is a genuinely new standard for truth.
In each truth regime, authority took charge and the priests, the professors, and the politicians stabilized the system and ran the process in a manner that allowed the group to act successfully in the real world."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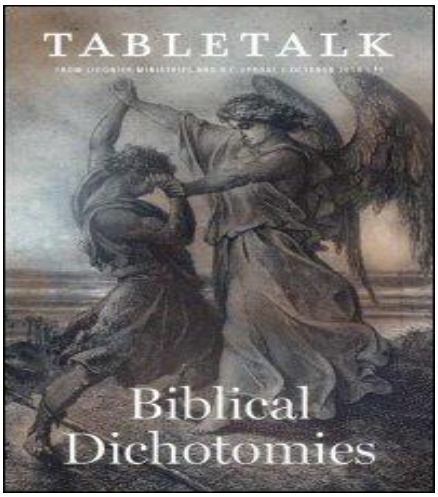
In each truth regime, authority took charge and the priests, the professors, and the politicians stabilized the system and ran the process in a manner that allowed the group to act successfully in the real world...
In addition to size and structure, there is a third element affecting the success of a group's decision, the organization's truth system. Most groups function primarily as information-processing societies. They have standards for determining what is true (inspiration, reason, and consensus). They have a specialized language including acronyms, buzzwords, and unique phrases that make some things easier to say than others. They have a process for sharing information: sometimes it is very hierarchical; sometimes it is collegial. Groups have concepts – existing descriptions of reality on which all the members agree but which may or may not be true. And they have values – goals, biases, and shared visions of the future. Finally, there is usually a commitment to speak truthfully to each other in the name of some greater objective.

Is Truth Exclusive?

- **Law of Non-contradiction – A and the opposite of A cannot both be true.**
- **Many believe that truth claims are "both/and" rather than "either/or."**
- **Mutually exclusive propositions cannot both be true (square circles).**

|FROM TRUTH UNTO TOLERANCE EMPHASIS|



The New Testament writers frequently contrast flesh (Greek *sarx*) and Spirit/spirit (Greek *pneuma*). But the contrasts are not all the same.

Physical vs. Spiritual Aspect

Paul exhorts, "Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body [*sarx*] and spirit" (2 Cor. 7:1). His point is that sin contaminates our whole being, which he views here as having two aspects: physical (external) and spiritual (internal). Paul uses this dichotomy elsewhere:

"Though I am absent in body [*sarx*], yet I am with you in spirit" (Col. 2:5; see 1 Cor. 5:3); "you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5).

Physical Weakness vs. Noble Desires

"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41; Mark 14:38). We can be physically weak in a way that makes it hard to do what is right while nobly desiring to do what is right.

Physical Body vs. Non-physical Person

"See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39). After Jesus rose from the dead, He had to convince His disciples that He had a physical body and was not merely a ghost or non-physical person.

Paul contrasts physical and spiritual warfare: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but . . . against the spiritual forces [Greek *pneumatikos*, an adjectival form of *pneuma*] of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

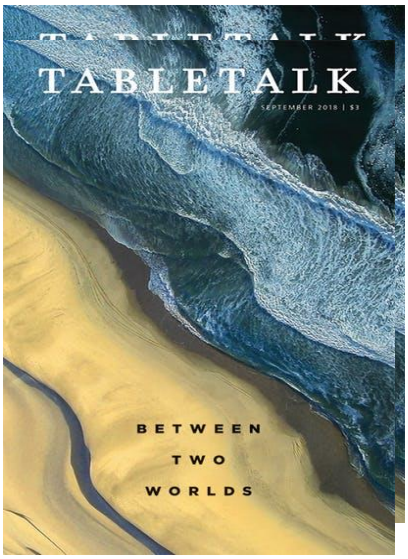
Physical Body vs. Holy Spirit

Christ appeared and was killed in a body, and the Spirit resurrected Him:

"He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit" (1 Tim. 3:16). Christ was "put to death in the body [*sarx*] but made alive in the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18 NIV; see 4:6).

Perishable vs. Imperishable Body

In 1 Corinthians 15:35–57, Paul contrasts our perishable (physical) body with our future imperishable (physical) resurrection body: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable " (v. 50). "It is sown a natural body [Greek *sōma*, a synonym of *sarx*]; it is raised a spiritual [*pneumatikos*] body [*sōma*]. If there is a natural body [*sōma*], there is also a spiritual body [*pneumatikos*]" (v. 44). In this case, the natural body and the spiritual body are both physical; the Bible never calls the body itself evil. The difference between them is that the spiritual, or resurrection, body will never die.



The Already and the Not Yet

by Burk Parsons

This world is not our home, but it will be. We live out our days in this sad world eagerly awaiting the new heaven and new earth, clinging daily to this promise: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3–4). We are pilgrims on our journey home, and we are homesick for a place we have never been. We are foreigners, aliens, and strangers in a strange land whose citizenship in heaven is secure in the One who has gone before us, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, and who is returning to judge, to conquer, and consummate.

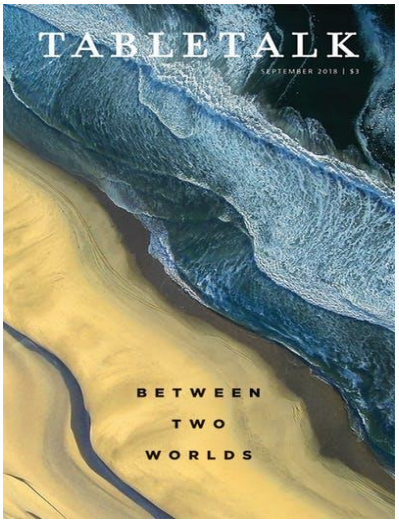
We are pilgrims on our journey home, and we are homesick for a place we have never been.

In this world we will have tribulation, but "take heart," Jesus said—not because we will eventually overcome the world, completely change the world, get used to this world, or come to love the world—but because Jesus declared, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). And so, we wait between the *already* and *not yet*, between what our Lord has declared is already true and what has not yet been revealed. However, our waiting is not in vain, nor is it a passive waiting or an isolated waiting. Rather, we wait for our Groom so that He might gather His bride from every tribe, tongue, and nation for His glory. We wait with hopeful expectation, with active participation in the mission of God, and in community with the church of Jesus Christ. For Christ is the light of the world, and we who are united to Him by [obedient] faith are in Him. As such, as soon as Christ calls us out of darkness and into His marvelous light, He sends us back into the darkness to shine in both word and deed before the watching world. As the world sees our good works and as the world hears our proclamation of the glorious gospel, the bride of Christ from around the world will glorify our Father in heaven.

Although withdrawing entirely from the world often seems attractive, the Lord never gives us that option (1 Cor. 5:9–10). Rather, as we live in this world of sin and in these bodies of sin, we are ambassadors of Christ on our journey to the promised land. When we pilgrims arrive home, Jesus will wipe away every tear from our eyes—not just our tears of sadness, but our tears of joy—for otherwise we would never be able to see Him face-to-face as we worship Him forever *coram Deo*.

Eternity in Our Hearts

by John Tweeddale



Few things better capture the anticipation of seeing Christ face-to-face than a wedding. No matter how beautiful her dress, the bride never walks down the aisle with her gaze on her gown. Her focus is on her soon-to-be husband.. As stunning as heaven will be, what makes it so marvelous is that we will finally see our Savior's face. The church as the bride will be with Jesus as the groom, and they will live happily ever after.

The English poet named Anne Cousin penned the well-known hymn "The Sands of Time Are Sinking. One stanza in particular encapsulates the drama of beholding Christ in glory:

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel's land.

This side of eternity, the Christian life is like an engagement. It is lived in anticipation of the wedding day. As Christians, we live in between the already of our betrothal to Christ and the not-yet of the wedding feast of the lamb. We are to be like the bride-to-be who takes every occasion to prepare for life with her beloved. The expectation of seeing Christ by sight in heaven must therefore inform how we live by faith here on earth.

The expectation of seeing Christ by sight in heaven must inform how we live by faith here on earth.

On a more basic level, the eagerness felt by engaged couples exposes a fundamental desire that all people share: a longing for eternity. This point is well made by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 3:9–11:

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

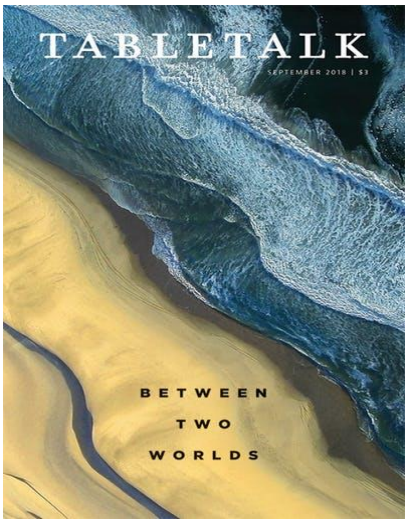
Let's consider two ways this text teaches us about our longing for eternity. First, we are told that God "has made everything beautiful in its time" (v. 11). One modern commentator has called this verse "the greatest statement of divine providence in the whole of Scripture." What makes this biblical text so striking is that there is much in life that is far from beautiful. But the Preacher isn't unaware of the ugliness that pervades the world. His question in verse 9 echoes the curse pronouncement in the garden of Eden: "What gain has the worker from his toil?" This is not merely a rhetorical question that is detached from the pressures of real life experience (see 1:3). The apparent futility of hard work with little gain is something he has witnessed firsthand. "I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with" (3:10).

To be clear, the biblical record affirms the dignity of work. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were commanded to execute their duties with the promise of being fruitful (Gen. 1:28–31; 2:15–17; see Eccl. 3:13). But after the fall, work is toilsome (Gen. 3:17–19). We no longer perform our tasks in the lush environs of a garden but in the harsh conditions of a wilderness filled with thorns and thistles, failure and frustration. As the Preacher laments in Ecclesiastes 2:23, "Work is a vexation." When we face hardship, injustice in the workplace, and defeat in completing assignments, we are confronted with the painful truth that this fallen world will never yield lasting gain. Vocational dissatisfaction reminds us that we were made for something greater than that which our hobbies and careers can offer.

But there is hope. We are told that God has made everything beautiful in its time. The "everything" in Ecclesiastes 3:11 harks back to the "everything" in verse 1: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." That life is lived under the watchful care of a sovereign Creator illumines our understanding of everything. In light of His providence, we learn that there is a time for birth and death, for planting and gathering, for mourning and dancing, for war and peace. Over all these things, God is in control. The beauty is found in the discovery that God orchestrates every last detail according to His perfect design.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 is the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament. In Romans 8:28, the Apostle Paul states, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Notice that Paul does not say that all things *are* good but that all things *work together* for good. And what is the good? It is being conformed into the likeness of Christ (v. 29). As Christians experience the seasons of life, we can be comforted in knowing that God uses every circumstance to shape us more and more into the image of His Son.

Puritan Thomas Watson wrote a short book titled *A Divine Cordial*, based on Romans 8:28, in order to comfort Christians undergoing suffering. He observed that "the best things and the worst things, by the overruling hand of the great God, do work together for the good of the saints." It is undeniable that this world is often grim and filled with heartache. But God beautifully uses both joys and sorrows to transform us as Christians into the likeness of Christ. Disappointments have a way of making us long even more to be with Him.



Living in the World to Come

by Mark E. Ross

The opening vision of the book of Revelation matches its last. In the first, John hears a loud voice commanding him to write what he sees, and he beholds the risen and glorious Lord Jesus, standing in the midst of His churches (1:10–20). The final vision is the descent of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Again, John hears a loud voice: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (21:1–3). Here, too, the presence of the Lord with His church is the focus. This is not only this book's, but the whole Bible's, consummation—Immanuel, "God with us."

The opening chapter of Revelation is not just a vision of the Lord; it is also a vision of the Lord's Day (1:10). This is the first known use of this term in reference to the first day of the week. Though this term occurs only here in the New Testament, the early church fathers leave no doubt that this is a reference to the day we call Sunday, which they observed as memorial to the Lord's resurrection. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the day is called by its Jewish name, literally translated "the first of the Sabbath" (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). **English translations commonly use "week" in the phrase**, but behind it stands the Greek word *sabbaton*, which simply translates the Hebrew word for "Sabbath" (*shabbat*). The significance of this will appear below.

Very early in the history of the church, the first day of the week became the day when Christians gathered for worship. Possibly this practice began on the day of Jesus' resurrection, for it was then that our resurrected Lord first met with His disciples and "stood among them" (Luke 24:36ff.). John's gospel likewise reports that "he came and stood among them," with special emphasis placed upon the identification of the day—"on the evening of that day, the first day of the week" (20:19). The next dated meeting of the Lord with His disciples was "eight days later," when Jesus again "came and stood among them" (v. 26). This was the following Sunday by Jewish inclusive counting (see "the third day"; Luke 24:7; 21, 46). In Acts 20:7, Luke reports that the church in Troas gathered together on "the first of the Sabbath" to break bread. His wording suggests that this was their regular practice. Paul had arrived there seven days earlier, and though he was hastening to make Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost (v. 16), he stayed at Troas seven days, apparently to be there "on the first day of the week, when [they] were gathered together to break bread" (v. 7).

The significance of this reference could easily be missed by English readers. We are so accustomed to the organization of time by weeks that we might assume it has always been so, and it was among the Jews. But it was not among the gentiles. The New Testament does not even have a Greek word for it, but uses the Jewish word for "Sabbath," with the day succeeding it called "the first of the Sabbath." The planetary week that we know only later became standard across the Roman Empire. Thus, in Acts 20:7, as also in Paul's instructions to the churches of Galatia and Corinth mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:2, we must remember that all these churches were in gentile territory, where "week" was not a standard measure of time. Yet the Apostle to the gentiles has evidently organized these churches according to a seven-day cycle, with emphasis falling on "the first of the Sabbath" rather than the seventh day that was called the "Sabbath." While in 1 Corinthians 16:2 there is no mention of the church's meeting together on this day, it would be very odd for Paul to specify this day for setting apart gifts for the church of Jerusalem unless there was something in their life together as Christians that pointed to this day rather than another for such a demonstration of "the communion of saints." It is not as if they were paid on a weekly basis on "the first of the Sabbath," for the weekly calendar had not yet become commonplace.

Paul would certainly not be one to impose a purely Jewish ceremony upon gentile churches, so the seven-day cycle must have had more enduring authority than the other festivals instituted at Sinai (Lev. 23). Paul indeed faults the Galatians for observing "days and months and seasons and years" (Gal. 4:10), which, along with circumcision, were Jewish ceremonies imposed on them by false teachers (5:2–6; so also Acts 15:1). No doubt, a similar imposition is behind Paul's warning to the Colossians not to let anyone be their judge "in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Col. 2:16). **Yet, along with these strong rejections of the Jewish ceremonies, Paul instructs the Galatians and Corinthians to "put something aside and store it up" on "the first day of every week"** (1 Cor. 16:2). Clearly, something greater than Moses was here. The weekly Sabbath of the Jews was not a ceremony first instituted at Sinai. It was a creation ordinance given at the beginning of the world for all people (Gen. 2:1–3). Our Lord indicated as much when He said, "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27)—it was not just for the Jew.

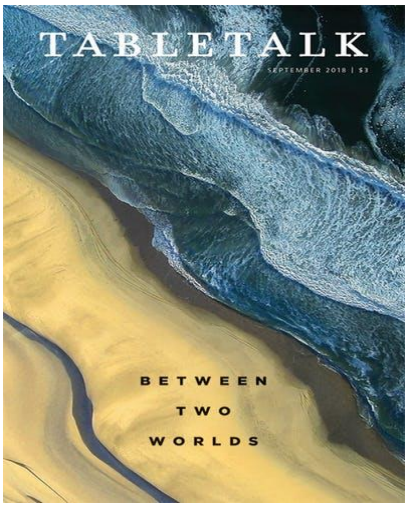
The Sabbath day was lost to the world sometime after the fall, but it was reclaimed for Israel at the time of the exodus (Ex. 16) and incorporated in the covenant God made with them at Sinai (20:8–11). Indeed, it became the sign of that covenant, to be observed throughout their generations, as a covenant forever (31:12–17). It became a day of "holy convocation" (Lev. 23:1–3) with special sacrifices appointed for its celebration (Num. 28:1–10). Ever the memorial of God's creation of heaven and earth (Ex. 20:8–11; 31:17; Lev. 24:8), Moses also made it a memorial to Israel's redemption from Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15). "Rest" was the principal idea connected with its observance, but this rest was not merely ceasing from labor. It was also a holy convocation at the house of Yahweh, the symbol and focus of His living presence among them in both the tabernacle (Ex. 25:8) and its successor, the temple (2 Chron. 6:18). The Sabbath also pointed forward to the everlasting rest that would come at the consummation (Heb. 3:7–4:10).

Psalm 92 is "A Song for the Sabbath," and it celebrates the great blessing this day offers to the people of God. Its opening verses speak of the goodness and joy of worshiping in His presence (vv. 1–4), and its concluding verses speak of the flourishing that comes to those who are thus planted in the house and courts of our God (vv. 12–15). The pinnacle of this neatly balanced song is verse 8: "But you, O Lord, are on high forever." It is the only single line in the psalm, and it occurs at its very center. Above and below this pivotal verse, the overthrow of the wicked (vv. 5–7) and the exaltation of the righteous (vv. 9–11) are rehearsed. Sabbath rest and worship thus offer an oasis for the weary and heavy-laden people of God, who live in a world where the wicked often flourish and the righteous often suffer. The worship of the Sabbath day peels back the illusion created by this fallen world and shows us that God is on high forever, and therefore the true outcome of all things will be just as He has promised—everlasting rest will come to the people of God. The Sabbath day thus anticipates the consummated kingdom, bringing into time the blessings of eternity and bringing down to earth the joys of heaven.

The New Testament does not do away with this appointed means of grace but transfers it to a new day. While Paul authoritatively abolishes the duty of seventh-day worship (Rom. 14:1–6; Gal. 4:8–11; Col. 2:16–23), he at the same time organizes churches around "the first of the Sabbath" (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), which by the time of John's Revelation was known as the Lord's Day. Like the Sabbath day that preceded it in the Old Testament, it is the day above all days when the New Testament people of God are joined in holy convocation, hearing God's Word read aloud and expounded, and breaking bread with one another (Acts 20:7). It is the day above all days when the Lord is present with His people, standing in the midst of them, enthroned upon their praises (Ps. 22:3), as they sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and offer their prayers to Him (1 Tim. 2:1).

John Eliot (1604-90) preached that those who were zealous for and zealous on the Lord's Day would thereby spend one-seventh of their life on earth in heaven. While they lived on earth, they would be no stranger to heaven, and when they died heaven would be no strange place to them. No, indeed, for they will have been there a thousand times before.

The Apostle John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when he saw the Lord standing among His churches, again speaking words of hope and assurance. The Lord Jesus still reveals Himself to His churches when they gather to worship Him in spirit and in truth. The Lord's Day has especially been appointed for this purpose and it is rich with blessing. As the Puritan David Clarkson observed, "So that the presence of God, which, enjoyed in private, is but a stream, in public becomes a river that makes glad the city of God."



God's People in Exile

by Ra McLaughlin

Most people intuitively recognize the difference between a house and a home. That's what makes exile such an effective punishment — it prevents us from going home. It separates us from loved ones and safety, and it strips us of our sense of belonging. It can even put us in hostile and dangerous places. God's people have been living as exiles in foreign lands ever since we were thrown out of the garden of Eden. Our entire history has been a cycle of exile and restoration. The good news is that the cycle is coming to an end. For now, though, our lives are a mixture of both exile and restoration.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Humanity was created as part of God's plan to extend His heavenly kingdom to earth (Matt. 6:10; Rev. 21–22). To accomplish this, God created a perfect world and set aside a special land called Eden (meaning "pleasant" or "delightful place" in Hebrew). The four rivers in Eden (Gen. 2:10–14) indicate that it stretched from Mesopotamia to Egypt.

God planted a garden in Eden, from which the headwaters of all four rivers flowed. This suggests that the garden was both elevated and central, perhaps in the Judean Mountains. He also assigned humanity to "work" and "keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15) and to "fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28). In other words, our job was to expand the borders of the garden to the ends of the earth.

In Eden, God established the covenant of works to govern our relationship with Him (Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2). We were responsible to obey God by fulfilling our appointed duties and by not eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 2:17). If we obeyed, we would be blessed with everlasting life (3:22). If we didn't, we would be liable unto death (2:17).

Sadly, the serpent tricked Eve, Eve persuaded Adam, they both ate the forbidden fruit, and humanity was exiled from the garden (chap. 3). God posted angelic guards to make sure humanity didn't sneak back in (v. 24).

THE CURSE OF EXILE

Humanity's first exile cast us from God's manifest presence and put us and the rest of creation under God's curse (Rom. 8:20–22). Work became hard, childbearing became painful, and everyone eventually died (Gen. 3:16–19). We lived in broken fellowship with God (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:1–3) and in human conflict. Those conditions have persisted. Without God's intervention, that's all we can ever be.

God promised to send a Redeemer to save us from exile and ultimately from death (Gen. 3:15). He established the covenant of grace (WCF 7.2), through which Christ is reversing the curse and exile of Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12–19).

We live and walk by faith, knowing that God's promises are true even when they don't feel like it.

Humanity's exile from the garden became programmatic for the way God administered His covenant with humanity, at least on a corporate level. God gives us covenant laws. We can keep them and be blessed or break them and be cursed. The curse might be as bad as death, but God more frequently opts for something such as exile. If we turn to Him in faith, He'll redeem us. If we don't, punishment might increase (Lev. 26; Deut. 28–31).

On our own, we can never be good enough to avoid exile, let alone earn God's blessings. So, Christ does it for us. If we're united to Him by [obedient] faith, we have the promise of full restoration from Adam's exile.

THE FLOOD

After being exiled from the garden, humanity descended into further wickedness. We became false worshipers and murderers, despising both God and neighbor. Cain, the first murderer, was exiled from the Lord's presence in Eden (Gen. 4:16), and his descendants were worse than he had been. Humanity became so evil that God destroyed almost all of us in the flood (chaps. 6–9). Only Noah and his family were spared.

The flood carried Noah to Ararat, just beyond the border of Eden. This geographical move amplified humanity's curse, taking us further from God's favored land. Nevertheless, God confirmed the covenant of grace with Noah (6:18; 9:9), indicating that through Noah, humanity would recover what had been lost not just in the flood but in the fall.

Under the Noahic covenant, humanity began to be restored to God's favor. Correspondingly, we also began to move back into Eden. It was very different by this time, but it still represented the hope of God's kingdom.

ABRAHAM'S SOJOURN

Eventually, God chose Abraham to become the father of a new nation, through which God would fulfill His plan for an earthly kingdom (12:1–3; 17:4–8). Geographically, He led Abraham from the distant portions of Eden in Mesopotamia toward its center.

Abraham's move was occasioned by God's grace and blessing rather than by His wrath and curse. Still, it involved his leaving his home without knowing where he was going. Moreover, when Abraham got to Canaan, the land was in a severe famine (12:10). So, he temporarily moved his family to Egypt, then back to Canaan once the famine had ended.

During this time, Abraham's life seemed far from blessed. His wife was taken into Pharaoh's harem, his nephew was kidnapped, and Abraham had to lead his household into battle (chaps. 12–14). All this was before God made a covenant with him. God had given him several offers and assurances of land and progeny (12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17) and later confirmed them at Abraham's request (15:8).

God covenanted to give Canaan to Abraham, along with descendants too numerous to count. Through those descendants, He would extend Abraham's kingdom over the entire world (vv. 1–21; 17:1–14; Rom. 4:13).

Abraham never saw these promises fulfilled (Heb. 11:13). He lived and died as a foreigner in the very land God had promised to give him, with only one son (Isaac) to whom God had extended the covenant promise (Gen. 22:16–18). But neither Abraham nor anyone in Scripture after him ever believed that God's promises had failed.

THE EXODUS

Two generations later, Abraham's family moved back to Egypt as honored guests, with God's promise that they would return to Canaan as a great nation (Gen. 46:3–4). That promise was fulfilled, but only after God allowed the Israelites to be enslaved by the Egyptians for centuries (Ex. 6:6; 12:40).

God returned Israel to Canaan not because they remembered His covenant but because He did. (2:23–25). As with Noah and Abraham, the reason for their prolonged suffering appears not to have been their own sin but the sinfulness of others. Nevertheless, God used it for their good (Rom. 8:28). Israel became a mighty nation and left with the plunder of Egypt (Ex. 3:22).

By returning to Canaan, Israel was repeating a move Abraham had made. Like Adam, they had been cast out of the garden. Like Noah, they had been cast out of Eden. Like Adam, Noah, and Abraham, they had been promised a return to Eden, where they would begin to extend God's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Israel became unfaithful to God during the exodus. So, even though He allowed the nation to leave Egypt, He didn't restore them to the promised land. Instead, He extended their exile by having them wander until the entire first generation that had left Egypt, except Joshua and Caleb, had died in the wilderness (Num. 14).

THE FIRST KINGDOM

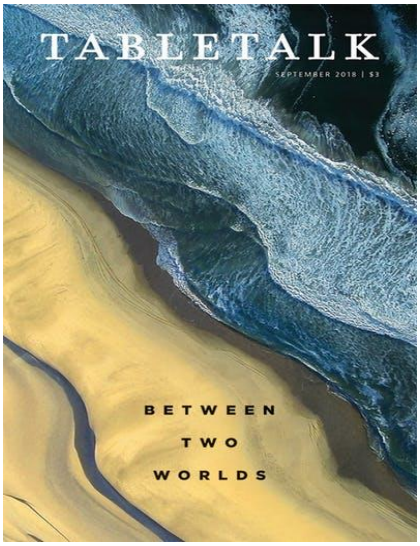
In Canaan, Israel struggled for centuries before God made a covenant with David that promised one of his sons would rule Israel forever (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89). Then, under David's son Solomon, Israel rose to the height of its power. Its borders stretched to the edges of Eden and its people were too numerous to count (1 Kings 4:20–21), just as God had vowed to Abraham.

Solomon built the temple as God's house and throne room (1 Chron. 28:2; Isa. 6:1), and Solomon's own throne was an extension of God's (1 Chron. 28:5–6; 29:23). Like the tabernacle, the temple and its furnishings echoed imagery from Eden. Both structures outwardly reflected their spiritual purpose of being the place where God dwelled and met with His people. But even here, something was missing. God didn't walk with His people as He had with Adam in the garden.

Later, Solomon himself became unfaithful. So, in the days of his son Rehoboam, the kingdom was divided between Judah in the south and Israel in the north (1 Kings 12:16–24). Eventually, both the northern and southern kingdoms were taken into new exiles. Just as they had spiritually distanced themselves from God, they were geographically removed from His throne.

THE LAST KINGDOM

Where does that leave us now? Are we living in exile, or are we living in God's heavenly kingdom on earth? In some sense, it's both. Insofar as God's kingdom is already here, it's largely spiritual (Luke 17:20–21). So, we're physical exiles but not spiritual exiles. We struggle with the physical world, corruptible flesh, and the presence of sin (Rom. 7:14–25; Gal. 5:17). But spiritually, we're citizens of God's kingdom, indwelled by the Holy Spirit, and seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:4–7).



Living as Dual Citizens

by Justin Taylor

It was not easy to trap Jesus in ethical or theological dilemmas. But that did not stop the Jewish leaders from trying. Jesus made it clear that His kingdom is not "of this world" (John 18:36). His kingdom, which properly belongs to the age to come, was breaking into this world and this present age. So how, the Jews wondered, did His kingdom relate to the institutions of our time, such as the family and the state?

In Luke 20, the Sadducees pushed the family question on Him, constructing a thought experiment about the nature of marriage in the resurrection for a widower who remarries. Jesus responded, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage" (vv. 34–35). Family is an enduring creation ordinance, but the kingdom of the age to come operates in a different way.

When the Jewish scribes and elders asked Jesus whether it was lawful to give tribute to Caesar, Jesus asked them to show Him a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription was on it? When they responded, "Caesar's," Jesus drew His conclusion: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (vv. 22–25). In a subversive way, Jesus radically limited the authority of Caesar and showed the unlimited authority of God. The likeness on the denarius meant they owed tribute to Caesar, but the image of God, stamped onto our human nature, means we owe our very lives to the maker of heaven and earth. Government is an enduring creation ordinance, but the kingdom of the age to come operates in a different way.

THE CITY OF GOD AND THE CITY OF MAN

In the fifth century, Augustine wrote *The City of God*, his magisterial work of political theology wherein he contrasts the *civita Dei* (city of God) with the *civitas terrena* (literally, city of the world). In popular circles, Augustine is widely misunderstood to have been talking about the City of God as life in heaven versus the City of Man as life on earth in the material realm. In that understanding, we are members of both the City of Man and the City of God. But in reality,

Augustine was talking about two communities or groups of like-minded individuals with competing visions of both heaven and earth. The City of Man begins—and this is crucial—not with creation but with the fall. Its desires and agenda are deeply disordered, driven by love of self and not of God, and operating according to the standards of the flesh and not the Spirit. The redeemed, who make up the City of God, seek God as the highest good and orient everything around love for Him. As Christians, then, we live among the City of Man but belong to the City of God.

IN BUT NOT OF

Augustine's paradigm has deep biblical roots. As we live in this world, we recognize that "here we have no lasting city" (Heb. 13:14); like Abraham, we look "forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (11:10). And yet, even though we are "sojourners and exiles" (1 Peter 2:11) who call no place on earth our permanent home, we are also commanded to "seek the welfare of the city . . . and pray to the Lord on its behalf" (Jer. 29:7). We are not to be "of the world" but are irreducibly "in the world" and sent deeper "into the world" as ambassadors and emissaries of Christ (John 17:15–16; see 1 Cor. 5:9–10). We are to be transformed by the Word instead of conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). We are to keep ourselves "unstained from the world" (James 1:27)—and yet we must taste like salt and shine like light (Matt. 5:13–16) to a dark and rotting culture around us (see Phil. 2:15).

Christ calls us to a life of discipleship where we follow Him in teaching others to obey everything He commanded us.

DUAL CITIZENSHIP

One of the biblical metaphors for thinking through our relationship between the present age and the age to come is citizenship. Citizenship is a publicly recognized legal status that authorizes someone to be a citizen—that is, a full and functioning member of a *civitas*, a social and political community, along with the rights and duties that come along with it. Unlike someone who is merely a subject in a kingdom, a citizen participates in the community to help maintain civic order.

In the book of Acts, we see the Apostle Paul not only acknowledging the concept of his Roman citizenship but also actively appealing to it. When the police told Paul and Silas that the magistrates authorized their quiet release from jail, Paul became indignant: "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out" (Acts 16:37). In Acts 22, Paul successfully protested a flogging at the hands of the magistrates by asking the centurion a simple question: "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned? . . . I am a citizen by birth" (vv. 25, 28). In both cases, the response by the Roman authorities was one of genuine fear, since they had been unjustly violating the rights of one of their citizens (21:38–39; 22:29).

Although Paul had obtained Roman citizenship through his family's history, he came to have another kind of citizenship as well. Writing to the church in Philippi, he says that for Christians, "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). Jesus said His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). When we are born again and are adopted into the family of God, we enter a new kingdom and submit to a new King, having been "delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).

FOUR WAYS TO LIVE IT OUT

Here are four things to remember as we seek to be faithful with our dual citizenship.

1. Recognize the rule of God over all, though He rules different institutions in different ways. Christ has authority over both heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18), but in light of the fall, He rules the temporal order of this age (including created institutions such as the family and the state) differently than He rules the church. Government in this age enforces order through the power of the sword, enforcing order through the coercion of law; the kingdom of God, on the other hand, comes through the power of the Spirit, producing transformation of the gathered people of God through the proclamation of the gospel and participation in the means of grace.

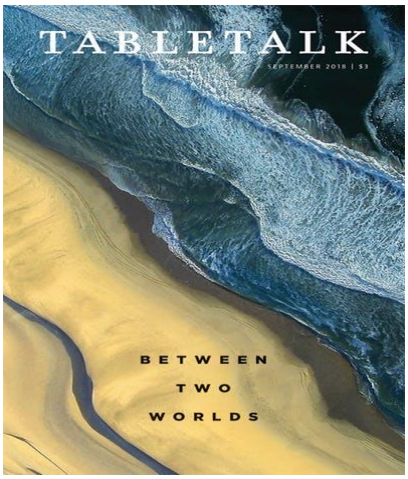
2. Understand that just because our earthly citizenship is not ultimate, that does not make it unimportant. Temporal things can make a significant difference. Paul knew that appealing to the authorities about his Roman citizenship was not the same as sharing the gospel with them. But his earthly rights were still important. Good laws cannot change hearts, but they can still mean the difference between life and death.

Yes, saving an eternal soul is more important than fixing a temporal need. Alleviating eternal suffering is superior to reducing the suffering of this age. But the Bible doesn't actually ask us to choose between evangelism & civic engagement, because Christ calls us to a life of discipleship where we publicly identify with Him and follow Him in teaching others to obey everything He commanded us (Matthew 28:19–20).

3. Gladly receive all of God's gifts, including His common grace of government. It is not wrong to feel frustration when the nations rage (Ps. 2), because this means the world is not operating according to its God-given design. But we must never forget the goodness of God in instituting this system in our fallen world. God has appointed earthly rulers (Rom. 13:1–2) for our good (v. 4), and we are to respect and honor them (v. 7), no matter how bad they are. Government is a gift from God, designed to promote and protect good while serving as a deterrent to that which is bad (vv. 2–4). One of the reasons we are to pray for our rulers is so that government will function in such a way that we have the sort of conditions that allow us to live quiet and godly lives (1 Tim. 2:2).

4. Embrace God's means on earth for publicly identifying our heavenly citizenship. At one level, the world cannot see our heavenly citizenship. It is a status recognized by no earthly government. Our life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). However, God has ordained a way in which our citizenship can be publicly declared here and now, in the age between the two advents of Christ. The church of Jesus Christ — the worshiping community made up of God's people gathered in God's place under God's rule practicing God's means of grace—is the expression of the kingdom of God in this world. Heavenly citizens [worshiping] at local churches on earth.

There are more important things in life than the political order and our civic engagement. It can easily become idolatry, invested with an allegiance and identity that goes beyond Scripture. But it is also easy to shirk our duties and participation as an earthly citizen, justifying our apathy for spiritual reasons that themselves go beyond Scripture. Whatever side we are tempted to emphasize, let us remember that we are dual citizens. Part of being a good citizen—in both the heavenly and earthly realms—involves letting our civilian lives be shaped by the gospel and informed by the Word of God as we prayerfully work to become informed, to love our neighbor, and to work for the common good of the city even as we wait for and invite others to the city yet to come.



Separationism

by Christopher Gordon

Christians today are greatly discouraged by what they are seeing in the world. It is becoming very difficult to be a Christian and live together in this world with unbelievers. Christians are thinking a lot about separation, and a farm to get away from it all doesn't seem like a bad idea.

There are certainly legitimate reasons for making a move to another place. The problem is that many Christians justify a move because they want to escape the problems they are experiencing in the world. After all, didn't the Lord call believers to be separate from the world (2 Cor. 6:14–18)? What does this mean? Are we called to withdraw from the world and have no contact with non-Christians?

Few Christians would think this call means we are to live a monastic life, but getting away from the world and its problems can be its own brand of monasticism. The irony is, that kind of separation can be a very worldly pursuit. It assumes that one can achieve in this life the glories of what is promised only in the new heavens and earth. And such a separation in this way sends a poor message to the world—that we don't care about them and only want to get away. What becomes of the Great Commission with this kind of separation? This is why we need a healthy consideration of what it means to be separate from the world.

COME OUT AND BE SEPARATE

Christians have always struggled with how to understand the call to be a separate people in the world. There have always been those who either, using Richard Niebuhr's classic categories, pit Christ against culture or assimilate Christ into culture. We can fall back into the world just as easily as we can desire to separate out of the world. So, to what kind of separation is God calling the Christian in this world?

A brief reflection of Paul's instruction to the Corinthian Christians provides us with the answer. They were allowing worldliness to go unchecked in the church. Some of the symptoms included sinful divisions, worldly ministry methods, pagan practices in worship, abuse of spiritual gifts, sexual immorality, and toleration of false doctrine.

Paul's goal in addressing these problems was to call the church to proper separation from the world as God's people. In 1st Cor. 5:1, Paul addresses a report that gross sexual immorality was being tolerated in the church. Because the church refused to address the issue by exercising church discipline, they were compromising their status as God's holy community.

The great need of the hour is convicted Christians who are willing to stand together for the truth of the gospel.

In calling the church to be separate, Paul made a surprising connection to the Old Testament: "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Paul grounded his call to separateness in the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The Passover, together with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, celebrated Israel's deliverance from death and their separation from the land of Egypt. Anything brought back among them from their former way of life was a threat to their separate status as God's people. The church, like Israel, was called to "go out from their midst, and be separate from them" (2 Cor. 6:17). They were to come out of Egypt and never to let Egypt come back into them.

Paul recognized that the church in Corinth was confused over the issue of separation. They appear to have taken his call to be separate as unreasonable.

Paul's answer is very instructive for us. He explained that the call to be separate does not mean that they were to have no contact with sinners in the world. They were not called to leave the world the way the monks tried to leave the world. Separation is not achieved by avoidance of sinners in the world. The believer is called to separate by way of fellowship. There is a participation in Christ's body that is unique only to believers. Paul was calling the church to think differently about the world than they did with regard to Christ's church.

The world will always be what it is. It operates on its own system of values, attractions, and wisdom that often stand in opposition to the righteousness of God. By becoming Christians, we have left their fellowship and been joined to another. Our former love for the world has been replaced by love for Christ, but none of these truths entails a withdrawal from or refusal to mix in among the people of the world. This is why Paul explained to the Corinthians that because we live in the world there is no possible way to avoid mixing with unbelievers in daily life. Christians have an earthly citizenship, too, so long as they remain on this earth.

Christians are separate from the world, however, insofar as we refuse to join that way of life that stands in opposition to our heavenly citizenship. We are called to separate from the world by refusing to have fellowship with those who practice a way of life from which we have been delivered. We are separate in our heavenly status as Christ's body and in the way that we behave before the world.

This is where the Corinthians had failed. They allowed into their fellowship someone who claimed to be a believer and yet lived in sexual immorality. The church's refusal to separate from their former way of life had the consequence of joining together the church and the world. This is why Paul called them to separate from "anyone named a brother" (1 Cor. 5:11) who lives in a manner inconsistent with their new identity as the redeemed people of God. The Lord calls us to separate from those who claim to be believers and yet live in a way that contradicts the Christian faith and life through the practice of sin without repentance. We separate by breaking fellowship with them. The intimacy, care, and participation that exists among believers is not shared with those who refuse to repent and believe the gospel.

The Corinthian church was to accomplish this separation through church discipline. By casting the man back into the world, they were preserving their separate status as Christ's people. Would they still cross paths with this man? Certainly. But now they no longer had Christian fellowship with him, and their willingness to maintain the purity of Christ's church as believers in the world is what biblical separation is all about.

HOW THEN SHALL WE SEPARATE?

With these principles set before us, there are a few ways forward that Christians should consider when it comes to the issue of biblical separation.

A separation, as described by Paul to the Corinthians, is the crying need of the hour for us, too. Because the call to be separate has not been taken seriously in the church, the church today has lost its identity in the world. The church ought to look very different from the world in belief and practice. Many churches could begin to solve this problem by casting out the "Achans" from their midst (see Josh. 7).

Second, Christians need to set the right priorities in their pursuit of separation. Often Christians are separating from each other and the world on all the wrong issues. Christians need to unite in what is most important as we allow for differences, without separation, on those matters of liberty of conscience.

Finally, Christians need to consider their witness to the world. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus specifically prayed to His Father that believers would not be taken out of the world (John 17:15). The Lord left us in the world to be His witnesses. Unbelievers need the gospel, and that is why we are here. Does the world perceive this about us? Do they see that we care enough to help them know the blessedness that we have in Christ? We carry the answer in the message of the cross, but if the sense unbelievers get from us is that we are running away from them, why would we think they will turn to Jesus and desire to enter our fellowship? In our proper separation, we go to them with the gospel and remember that our witness is the reason the Lord is preserving us in the world.

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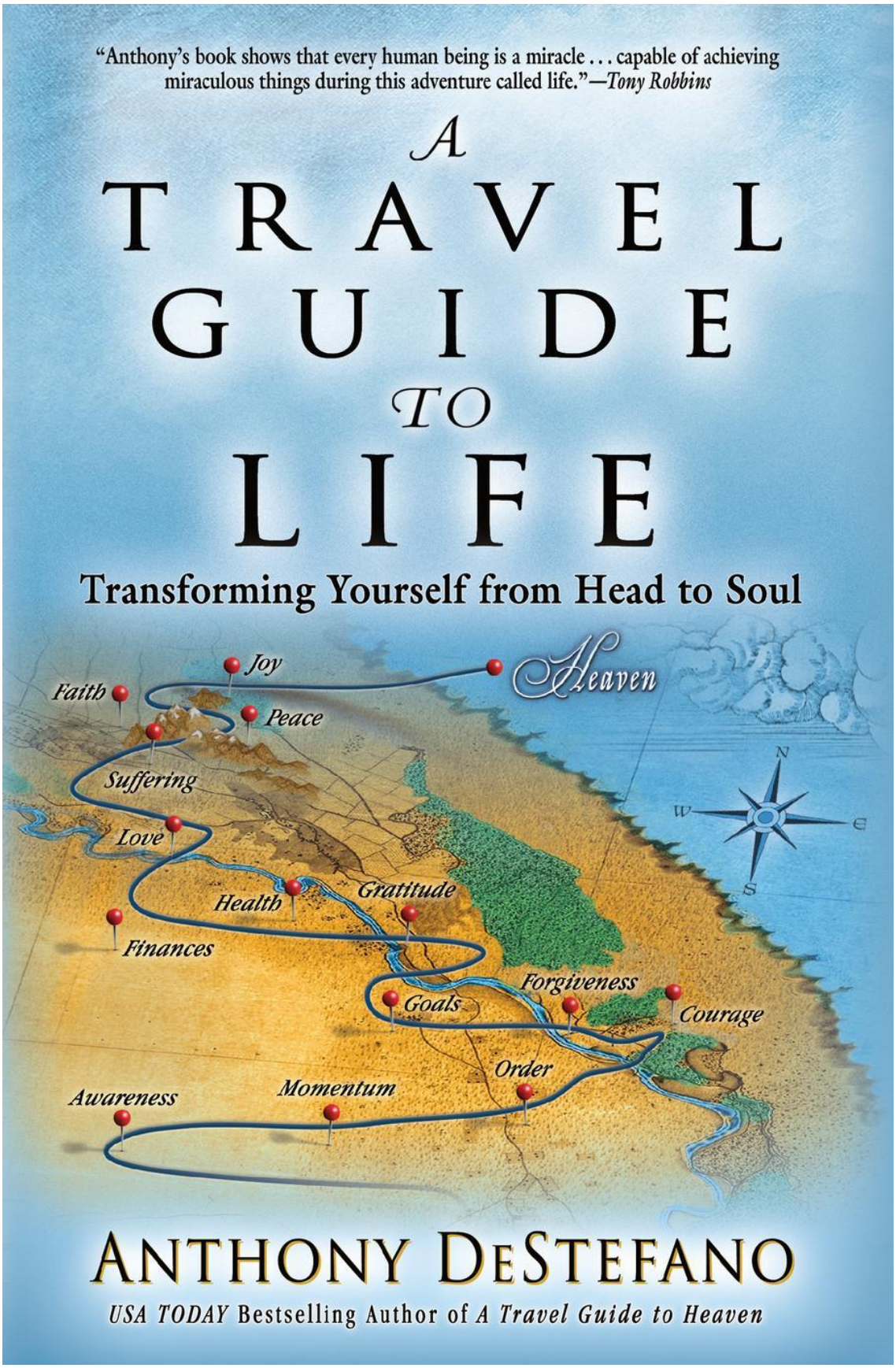
"Anthony's book shows that every human being is a miracle . . . capable of achieving miraculous things during this adventure called life."—Tony Robbins
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ANTHONY DESTEFANO
USA TODAY Bestselling Author of A Travel Guide to Heaven

A Tale of Two Worlds

You Are One Person—Body, Mind, and Spirit

There are four basic, foundational principles that all of us have to get into our heads—not only now, but for the rest of our lives.

Long after you finish this book and forget most of what's in it, you're going to continue to experience all the joys and agonies that go along with living in this world. But there are four "starting points" you have to keep coming back to no matter what happens and no matter how bad or good things are; four pillars on which the foundation of a consistently happy life needs to be built.

The first of these pillars has to do with the "body-mind-spirit" connection, and it's what I'd like to concentrate on in this chapter.

When things are going wrong and you're not happy and not at peace, you can't just think that you're going to change one thing and your whole life will be miraculously transformed. It won't, because "what's wrong" with your life is almost never just one thing. It's everything. It's the whole thing. It's all connected.

When you try to separate the body, mind, and spirit and excel in one particular area, you might very well have some degree of success, but your life, as a whole, is not going to benefit—in fact, your life, as a whole, might even suffer.

Think of it this way: If you move your left leg in one direction, and your right leg in the other, you're not going to go anywhere, are you? You're going to be stuck in the same position. Or if you're driving in your car and you try to step on the gas with one foot and the brake with the other, you're going to come to a screeching halt, right? And you'll probably do some damage to your vehicle, too.

The same concept applies here.

You're a human being. That means you're a *combination* of body, mind, and spirit. You're not just one entity. You're not pure spirit or mind, like the angels, and you're not pure matter, like the book you're holding in your hand. You're all three, at the very same time. That's the thing that separates you from the rest of creation. And all three—body, mind, and spirit—are "wired" together, intricately and seamlessly.

What's the practical result? Well, it means that if you stuff yourself with food and continually overeat, you might not just gain weight—you might also start feeling lazy, or spiritually dry, or sexually tempted, or you might find that it's easier for you to lie or cheat or lose your temper. The reason is that your body is wired to your spirit.

And if you read a thousand books in an effort to improve your mind, but fail to exercise spiritual charity and humility, you may end up knowing a lot of useless facts and acquire the reputation of a scholar, but underneath you might still be a hypocrite who's wrong on the most basic moral and ethical issues. Do you know any people like that? Any college professors, maybe? I do! The

reason is that the mind and spirit are wired together, and can't be separated. If you do something bad to one, the other is going to be affected in some way.

Now, *how* everything is connected is a little difficult to understand—even for the greatest theologians—and could easily be the subject of a whole book. But the bottom line is that it has to do with your *will*. Remember, all the decisions you make in life are controlled by your God-given free will. Try to picture this diagram. On one side you have all your *desires*—the desires of your body, the desires of your mind, and the desires of your spirit. And on the other side you have your *conscience*—the knowledge of right and wrong, the knowledge of which desires you should say yes to and which you should say no to. Over and above both of these is your will, which acts as the arbiter and judge between the two.

Your will is constantly making decisions. Day in, day out, year in, year out, in thousands of different situations, your will is *choosing*. And the more you give in to desires that are not good for you—that is, the more you disobey your conscience—the more your will is weakened. The will is just like a muscle. It needs to be exercised in order to stay strong. When you don't exercise it, it shrivels up and loses all its strength. Then, when it's called upon to make tough decisions in other areas of your life, it's not able to.

That's why people are always complaining that they have no "willpower." They've lost it because they've made hundreds and hundreds of bad choices that have essentially caused their will to atrophy, thereby losing its ability to choose wisely or to stick to choices it knows are correct.

It's so important for you to get what I'm saying here. Everything is intertwined! It's all part of the same system. When you give in to one particular desire that's wrong—be it physical, intellectual, or spiritual—you weaken the whole system and make it easier to succumb to other desires that aren't good for you. And those other desires might be totally different than the ones you originally made bad choices about. When you weaken the will, you lose power everywhere in life. You darken the intellect so it can't see what's right. You disable the body so it can't fight temptation. You deaden the spirit so it can't resist sin. You de-energize everything.

You're really a very incredible creation—a well-balanced, harmonious, integrated machine—and if you mess around with one part of it, you are going to cause the whole thing to break down.

What this means, practically, is that you have no choice but to take a holistic, "total-person" approach to life, especially when it comes to seeking happiness. You can't simply lose weight and expect to be happy. You can't simply make more money and expect to be happy. You can't simply read a bunch of books—or write them, for that matter—and expect to be happy. You can't even just pray and expect to be happy. Even the holiest hermits have to get out into the open air and exercise once in a while in order to clear their heads. Otherwise their interior prayer life would dry up. It has to—it's a law of the universe, a law put there by God himself when he created us.

Look, you *know* this is true—especially in the area of morality. You know that you can't practice vice, virtuously. Let me repeat that: *You can't practice vice, virtuously.*

A person who embezzles from his job is going to be the same kind of person who cheats on his taxes, the same kind of person who is dishonest about money in general. A person who is slovenly and sloppy and disorganized in his professional life is also going to be slovenly, sloppy, and disorganized in the way he thinks—and probably in his relationships, as well. A person who is addicted to pornography is going to be the same kind of person who lies to his spouse and has affairs with other women. He's not going to be a loving, honest, adoring, faithful husband. And if you think so, you're living in a fantasy world.

Oh, sure, you may be able to get away with "compartmentalizing" your ethics for a while—cheating in one area and trying to be "pure" in another—but it won't work for long, and certainly not forever. The same goes for the other parts of your life that aren't directly connected to morality. Plenty of people have satisfactory work lives but miserable marriages. Or wonderfully fit bodies but emotional lives that are a wreck. Or stimulating intellectual lives, but terribly unhealthy eating habits. People function all the time in this fractured, compartmentalized way. But it can't work forever. Eventually your life is going to fall apart. It has to because the foundation of the entire structure—your will—is the thing that's been eroded.

And even if you could live that way, I'm not going to try to help you do it. This topic is not about "functioning" or "coping." It's about happiness. And to be truly happy, truly fulfilled, and truly at peace, you have to be improving in every area of your life at the same time. You have to commit to working on the big picture—on the whole enchilada! So, for the last time, you are ONE person—body, mind, and spirit. And that's exactly the way you need to view yourself for the rest of your life.

Make sense? Then let's move on to the second lifetime principle.

About-Face!

The point is not to try to erase your past and start at square one. You left square one in the dust a long time ago. The point is not to begin at the beginning. That's gone. History. You're never going to see it again. The point is to turn around and *start over*.

What are the first commands they teach you in the military? In basic training, they show you a lot of things: how to keep physically fit; how to clean, assemble, and use your rifle; how to march; how to drill—and how to "about-face."

"About-face" simply means to turn around and go in the opposite direction. The sergeants yelling at you during boot camp don't tell you to go back to the starting point. They don't tell you to find the spot on the field where you were standing when the march began. They don't care where the heck you came from or where the heck you happen to be. All they care about is that you stop in your tracks and go the other way.

In war—and life can sometimes be like war—when you discover that you're marching into enemy territory, you have to be ready to reverse yourself. There's no time for soul-searching. No time for self-pity. No time for self-recrimination. No time for worrying about where you began or why you got there. There's no time for anything. You just have to turn your butt around and get going!

And that's lifetime principle number two. If you see that you're headed in the wrong direction, the first thing you have to do is stop everything—including your self-loathing and your self-analysis and whatever else you're brooding about—and make a decision to reverse the behavior that's causing you to go down that road.

Too simple, you say?

Baloney! It's not. It's the only thing you *can* do. It's the only choice you have. I'm not saying it's easy. Sometimes it's the most difficult thing in the world. I'm just saying it's simple. It's foundational. It's the only sensible course open to you.

You have to be really honest with yourself now. Is what you're doing today moving you closer to where you want to be tomorrow? If not, you have to stop and about-face. I'm sure you know this already. You might even know exactly what you have to do—or at least you have a general idea. It's not a case of knowing what to do. It's a case of *doing what you know*.

The Bible makes some pretty mind-blowing promises. It claims, for instance, that the kind of peace you can have if you follow God's will is so special and so complete and so unlike anything else you've ever experienced, it "transcends all understanding." The Bible also says, in one famous passage from the book of Revelation, that God will "make all things new." *New.*

This is deep stuff. It's not something you hear from armchair therapists or TV talk show hosts or self-help experts. God doesn't ever say he's going to take you back to "square one" or let you start "at the beginning." He doesn't even promise that he'll give you any big psychological "breakthroughs" in terms of understanding your past. In fact, you can search all of Scripture and you won't find a single verse that says, "Blessed are they who understand." Instead, what you'll find is "Take up your cross and follow me."

If you do *that*—take up your cross and follow God—then God pledges that he'll make everything in your life brand-new. He'll take all that's ever happened to you in the past—all the screw-ups and all the suffering and all the evil—and *transform* it into something else, something unexpected, something that actually gives you strength and peace and happiness. That's what authentic Christian spirituality has to offer. But for those kinds of profound, transformative experiences to take place, certain other decisions have to be made first—decisions involving faith and repentance and forgiveness.

We'll be talking about each of those in its proper place. But we're not quite ready for them yet. The only decision we're concerned with here is the one to turn around. And that decision can be made at any time, even if you don't yet believe in God or Christianity or the spiritual world. It's a decision that takes just a second to make. But oh, what an important second. It's a second that can literally mean the difference between life and death.

Momentum Is the Key

In order to properly understand the third lifetime principle, we're going to have to do some physics. Remember physics from school? Remember all the "laws" of the universe? The law of gravity? The law of conservation of matter and energy?

Well, there was another law they taught us that's absolutely essential if we want to understand why life can be so unhappy and why it can be so difficult to change. It's called the *law of inertia.* Do you recall what this law states? "An object at rest tends to stay at rest."

Things don't just move by themselves unless something *makes* them move. That couldn't be more simple, right? But guess what? The law of inertia isn't only true in physics. It's true in every area of life. It's true for human beings. It's true for businesses. It's true for governments. It's especially true for people

Listen, there's a better way to get yourself to move, a better way to overcome the law of inertia—one that doesn't require explosive pressure. And it actually involves another principle from physics. It's called *momentum*.

Follow me here! This is one of the most important things in life to learn. And it's so simple that people forget it all the time. When an object at rest starts to move, it moves slowly at first. It doesn't just go at full speed instantaneously. It accelerates. It *builds* momentum.

The key to taking effective, long-lasting action is momentum. If you want to get out of a funk—any funk—the best thing to do is to start with small actions, even the tiniest ones, but to take them consistently over the period of a few days and weeks. Once you do that, things are bound to accelerate.

We've all got to get off this roller coaster we're on. Up and down, up and down. It never stops. How many "phases" have you gone through in your life? We're always going through "phases." Isn't it pathetic? We're always getting excited about this thing or that. Always trying some fad diet or exercise plan or personal development program. They all work for a while but then lose their power once the emotional high is gone. We're like dumb mice that keep going for the same piece of cheese in the same mousetrap, no matter how many times we get caught. Aren't you tired of it?

But if you start small and build slowly—or even if you just keep up the same pace—your progress won't stop with such depressing regularity. Life won't be a roller coaster or a pressure cooker or a series of phases anymore. Wouldn't that be nice?

This isn't just some personal development principle. It's at the heart of true spirituality. The Bible says, "Do not despise small beginnings." And if you look through Scripture, you'll find dozens of examples of battles in which a small handful of warriors was able to miraculously defeat a huge army. God always seems to go out of his way to show that small numbers of people—or even people of small stature—have the power to overcome overwhelming odds, as long as he is on their side.

The best example of this, of course, is the story of how God saved humanity. Now, nothing is bigger or greater or more powerful than God, right? And yet, when this same Almighty God chose to enter human history and become a man, he did so by first becoming a little baby. We can't ever forget that Jesus Christ—who Christians believe *is* God—was born a child in a small manger. And before that he was an embryo in his mother's womb. And before that he was a zygote—just two cells, yet divine! Consider the implications! If God himself thought it was best to start small, why wouldn't we use the same strategy?

Or if your life is a chaotic mess, then go ahead and start organizing a tiny part of it. Go clean your closet! Who cares if some people think that's silly? Who cares if it's a cliché? Who cares if you've got much bigger concerns? The point is that it works. It gets the juices flowing. It gives you the feeling that you're in control of your life—and that's something that's absolutely necessary if you're ever going to solve all your other problems.

Remember, this is just a starting point. But it's a starting point we've got to keep coming back to. Gravity is always going to be pulling us down. Stumbling blocks are always going to be thrust in our way. And when we run across them and they halt our progress, we've got to be able to jump-start ourselves with a minimum amount of turmoil. No more pressure cooker! Whether it's our bodies, our minds, or our spirits we're working on, it's always best to take baby steps first.

Bringing Order Out of Chaos

Here's another spiritual principle that has far-ranging implications—especially in terms of helping us to take control of our lives. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, one thing is extraordinarily clear: *God is a God of Order*.

The very first thing God did after he created the universe was to organize the universe—to separate light from darkness, to divide the water and the land, to bring clarity to the chaos. Now, of course these images aren't scientific. They aren't meant to be. Sacred Scripture should never be confused with a high school physics textbook. The point of Scripture is to present the deeper, underlying truth about life. And the tremendous truth being conveyed in the opening pages of the book of Genesis has to do with the nature of God.

God is simple in substance. God is Purity. God is Order. That's the truth to get into our heads.

And when God became Man in the person of Jesus Christ, he demonstrated those same characteristics again. Christ came into the world to perform a certain mission—the salvation of humanity. And he did it with extraordinary speed, order, and effectiveness. He was born in a very simple manner and then spent the first thirty years of his life in total, hidden quiet, preparing himself. Once he began, it took him only three short years to accomplish his objective. In three years he turned the whole world upside down—and it hasn't been the same since. Three years! That's efficiency for you! That's God.

When Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, he did something else that showed this characteristic. When the apostles discovered his empty tomb, they noticed something very interesting. They noticed that the burial shroud that had been used to cover Jesus' face was rolled up neatly in the corner. Such a tiny detail. But what significance! It means that when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, the first thing he did was to tidy up! The first thing he did was to put everything in its proper place—to clean his tomb before leaving it forever. And of course, that's to be expected. After all, Christ is God. And God's nature is to be orderly and clean.

What we've got to keep in mind here is that the thing most contrary to God is *sin*. The act of sinning is simply the act of turning away from God, right? Well, when we turn away from God—and then move in the opposite direction—what invariably happens is that we begin to take on qualities that are *different* than God; qualities that are *contrary* to God; qualities that are *opposite* to God. And that includes disorder. Sin, in its very nature, is division. It's disintegration. It's a falling apart—a breakdown of order. When we're not acting in line with God's will for us, that kind of disintegration happens to us on the inside—in our soul. There's an internal collapse that's not immediately perceptible to the people around us; an invisible chaos that we're sometimes not even aware of, even though we usually *feel* it in the form of unhappiness.

The good news is that what happens to us on the inside is sure to turn up on the outside—if we give it enough time. In other words, when our internal lives are messy, our exterior lives eventually become messy, too. I say this is good news because if there's a visible manifestation of the internal chaos, at least it can be a sign to us that something needs to change.

What happens when things break down morally and spiritually for us is that our *whole life* breaks down as well. And I mean this in the most literal way. It's not just that our relationships break down — I mean disorder prevails and chaos reigns.

And this is the point we need to understand. When we finally become tired of the chaos and emotional turmoil that often accompany a spiritual breakdown, it's almost instinctive for us to want to physically clean up. No matter what the root problem is, we know deep down that we have to start eliminating the clutter. And so it's common to hear people say they've had enough and are finally going to force themselves to clean their closet or their garage or whatever.

Sometimes people will poke fun at this natural inclination. They'll say that it's mere avoidance; that it's like "putting a Band-Aid on cancer." That because we don't want to take on the more painful, deeper problems in our marriage and our job and our finances; we instead tend to work on other less challenging tasks, like cleaning the closet. We do this, they say, in order to fool ourselves into believing that we're really making progress, to *distract* ourselves from the main problems of life, to simply make ourselves "feel good." In other words, some people think we're just wasting our time by cleaning up.

But guess what? They're wrong! They're missing the point completely. They're missing the whole spiritual significance of disorder. And so naturally they end up in a muddle, themselves. Sure, if cleaning up were the only thing a person ever did to combat his or her problems, it would qualify as a distraction. But it's not meant to be the only thing. It's meant to be a step. A step in the right direction. A step to build momentum. And we've already talked about how important momentum is.

Straightening up and putting things in order is always a good thing to do. The reason is that it's a sign you're trying to be in union with God—who, as we said, *is* order. No matter the problem, cleaning your desk or your office or your house is necessary because it's an attempt to make your work and living space more "God-like." It's an attempt to conform these spaces to God's nature. And that's never a mistake.

The same goes for cleaning yourself. Have you ever noticed that when things start to go really wrong in your life, all you want to do is stay in bed? When you're feeling lousy, it's difficult to even get washed and dressed and groomed in the morning. In addition to the other problems you have, there always seems to be an extra temptation to indulge in the sin of sloth—better known as laziness—especially with regard to your appearance and your schedule. Why do you think that is?

I'll tell you the answer—and I know I keep hammering home this same point—but *everything is connected*. The body, mind, and spirit are all tied together. What you do to one affects the other two—and the whole. If you're moving toward God, that is, trying to do *his* will, play by *his* rules, follow *his* map, then everything else in your life will start to "align" itself, too, eventually resulting in greater peace and happiness. If you're moving away from God, that is, trying to do *your* will, play by *your* rules, and follow *your* map, then everything else in your life will start to get chaotic and confused, not to mention depressing. And that's going to result in lethargy.

One of the best ways to combat this deterioration is to systematically eliminate the chaos from your life. You've heard the old saying, "Cleanliness is next to godliness"? Well, it's truer that you ever imagined. In fact, it's one of the most important spiritual truths in the universe. And it's time we all tried to make it part of our lifestyle.[10]

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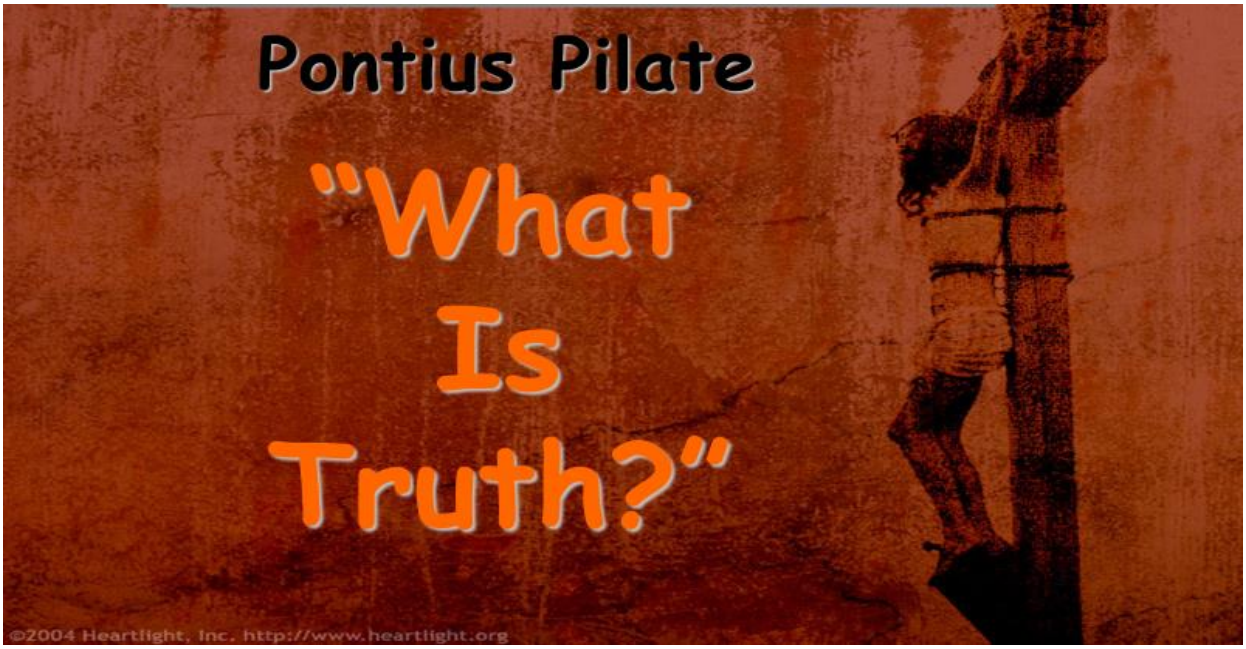
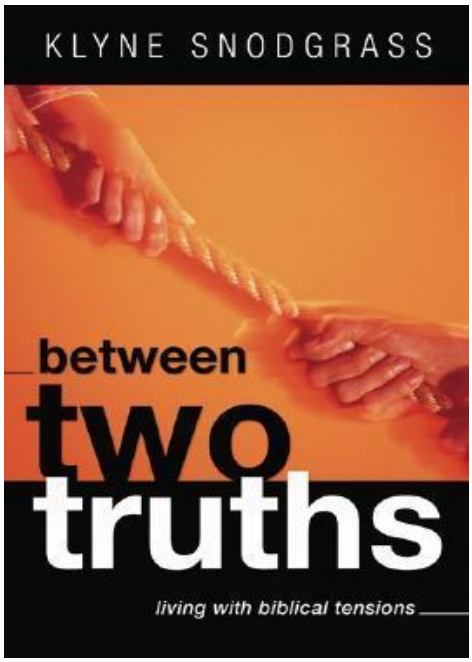
[10] DeStefano, A. (2014). *A travel guide to life: transforming yourself from head to soul*. New York City, NY: FaithWords.



CHRISTIAN DECISIONMAKING:

Binary Choice to Double Truths



Called to Be Separate

Some Christians resolve the issue of how we are to relate to the world by stressing the importance of being "separate." The phrase "separate from the world" does not occur in the Bible, but the theme of avoiding defilement is frequent. The classic text on this theme is 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1:

> Do not be joined wrongly with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and lawlessness have in common? What fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what part does belief have with unbelief? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God, just as God said, "I will live with them and move about among them, and I will be their God and they will be my people. Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will welcome you. I will be a father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of the flesh and spirit, accomplishing holiness in the fear of God.

Yet God's Word reveals to us that we cannot cut ourselves off from people and be righteous. We are to be travelers and pilgrims in this world, yes, but for the explicit purpose of being witnesses to those around us (1 Peter 2:11–12). How can we be witnesses if we are never with non-Christians? How can we be witnesses if we have cut ourselves off from the issues that society faces?

Jesus did not separate himself from sinful people. In fact, he seems to have been attracted to them. Prostitutes and tax collectors were part of his entourage. This was highly offensive to the religious people around Jesus. His willingness to associate and eat with sinners—the religious outcasts—was an important part of his ministry.

Being one of Jesus' disciples does not mean *less* involvement with other humans, but *more*.

No doubt many of us would have been uncomfortable with Jesus' association with sinners. The religious people of his day called him a glutton and wine drinker. And yet this is exactly the model we are to follow. Jesus' fellowship with sinners was a way of celebrating the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 11:19). These sinners found ready acceptance in Jesus' presence. In fact, he seems to have sought out the people who needed his presence most. And why not, if the good news really is a message of forgiveness?

We seem to have gotten things backward from 1st Corinthians 5: 13. We will tolerate a great deal from those who claim to be Christians, but are intolerant of non-Christians. We attempt to foist Christian values on a non-Christian world without providing the necessary Christian foundation for those values. We do have the responsibility to help society set its values and to point out wrong where it exists. But as Paul states in this passage, we have no business judging those outside the church. Our responsibility is to show the grace of God without condoning or ignoring sin. We are to call people from sin, not condemn them in it.

Separated to God

Christians are people whom God has separated to himself. That is more important than being separated from the world. In being separated to God, we are called to live in relation to him. All of our lives are determined by this act of grace. Any choices that we make about the world must derive from our being separated *to* God.

The discussion of separation goes hand in hand with the discussion of the practice of freedom. Four principles are to guide our decisions on separation: (1) Christians separate themselves from sinful activity, not people; (2) Separation may be required to avoid misleading less mature persons; (3) Separation has to do with the focus of our lives; (4) We do not need to fear the world.

First, Christians separate themselves from sinful activity, not from people. Our first concern must always be to show the love and grace of Christ. We cannot do that if we are never with people. This is no excuse for engaging in sinful activity. We do not have to sacrifice principle in order to show grace. Contact with sinful people is not defiling. Only sin itself defiles.

Second, separation may be required to avoid misleading less mature persons. When Paul discussed whether Christians could eat meat offered to idols (1 Cor. 8–10), he emphasized both Christian freedom and discretion. Where a practice may mislead a less mature person, it should be avoided. The well-being of people is more important than any action we choose.

Third, separation has to do with the focus of our lives. Typically, discussions about separation have been a debate about what acts or associations are permitted. Instead, more attention needs to be given to the focus of our lives. How do we spend our time? What nourishes our being? What are our true interests? What determines our lifestyles? To what extent do we live our lives as if God did not exist? By living in the awareness that we are separated *to* God, we will have taken healthier steps toward separation from the world than we would if all we did was simply follow a list of prohibited acts.

I do not mean to belittle the necessity of identifying specific acts that Christians should avoid. I am only concerned to avoid legalism and pharisaism. The Bible frequently lists sinful acts to be avoided, as in Colossians 3:5–9. Such lists need to be adapted with all seriousness. Christian conduct must conform to the character of Christ in decisions about our language, modesty, ego-centeredness, sexual relations, issues of justice, material wealth, and friendships. Relaxed standards in either individual or community ethics are unacceptable.

Fourth, we do not need to fear the world. Christians are often paranoid, as if the world were a monster that is going to strip us of our faith. The New Testament shows that the early church was very much concerned about the world, but at the same time they were not afraid of the world. Paul knew that nothing could separate him from the love of God. In a real sense the early Christians viewed their mission as claiming back for God his lost world. The world is one of the things that Paul listed as belonging to Christians because they belong to Christ (1 Cor. 3:22). Because their lives were separated to God, the early Christians had confidence and boldness in facing the world and seeking to call it back into relation to God. The world may bring danger, but the person born from God conquers the world through faith (1 John 5:4–5).[11]

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[11] Snodgrass, K. (2004). *Between Two Truths: Living with Biblical Tensions* (pp. 167–173). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Dilemmas and hard choices permeate life. We experience tension whenever we are faced with competing choices. The choice can be between two goods (such as choosing between flavors of ice cream), or between what we desire and what we know we should do (such as eating ice cream or sticking to our diet), or between two bad things (such as a mom's saying, "You can either eat your vegetables or skip dessert"). Whether the stakes are as weighty as God's moral laws or as common as watching your waistline, choices involve us in conflict, and conflict causes us to experience tension.

Tension is not confined to some alleged secular realm, nor is it merely a consequence of sinful living. It is also an inevitable aspect of a life of faith. In Ecclesiasticus, a book in the Apocrypha, we read: "Look at all the works of the Most High: they go in pairs, one the opposite of the other."

Tension permeates our faith. Every truth that we know is balanced by another truth that seems to be moving in the opposite direction. The gift of grace does not come without requirements. Freedom is not given without responsibility. In Christ we always have to deal with more than one reality at a time. Our faith is lived out between two or more competing truths, neither of which may be relinquished. We live between truths.

The focus on tension is not new. Christians have always wrestled with the fact that our faith gives us two or more realities that stand in tension or even in seeming contradiction with each other. "Double-truth" issues have dominated theological thinking throughout the church's history. We affirm both the humanity and the deity of Christ; the sovereignty of God and the free will of humanity; that humans are both sinful and yet created in the image of God. Throughout Christian history, heresy has resulted not from someone wanting to be evil or heretical but from someone taking a piece of the truth to an extreme and not doing justice to other truths as well. Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensées* that "there are then a great number of truths, both of faith and morality, which seem contradictory, and which all hold together in a wonderful system" (861).

The origin of the focus on tension is the Bible itself. The unhappy "preacher" in Ecclesiastes 7:14–18 saw the complexity of life and warned against going to extremes. **In Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 he points out that everything has its time, and the things that he lists are opposites** (for instance, "a time to weep and a time to laugh"). The usual assumption in the Old Testament is that God blesses the righteous and punishes the guilty, but Job and the psalmists cry out that the innocent are oppressed and the wicked prosper (Job 12 and Psalm 73). The God who is so concerned to reveal himself to humanity is at the same time a God who hides himself (Isa. 45:15). Humans cannot see him and continue to live (Ex. 33:20). With one hand God prevents people from approaching because he is too holy; with the other hand he draws them to himself out of love. Proverbs are designed to tell us what is generally true, but often proverbs conflict. Proverbs 26:4–5 places two "contradictory" proverbs back-to-back: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." The New Testament, even more so than the Old Testament, is filled with examples of tension. Paul tells us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is … not from works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). Yet, in James we read, "A person is justified from works and not from faith alone" (Jas. 2:24).

In Matthew 7:1 we are told not to judge, but in 7:16 we are told, "from their fruits you will know them." The "Prince of Peace" said in Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." But just before, in 10:34, he had said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace upon the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." The words of John 11:25–26 are intentionally contradictory: "The one believing in me, even if he should die, will live, and everyone living and believing in me will never die." Paul was a master of writing about tension. Galatians 2:20 contains the startling words: "I am no longer living, but Christ lives in me. What I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

In some ways tension is actually *increased* by belonging to Jesus Christ. It may seem strange to hear that biblical faith increases tension, but there is no question that it does. This tension is not destructive. Rather, it is peaceful and creative—but it is tension nonetheless.

There are perfectly good reasons why new tensions accompany the faith, for Christianity introduces new facts and forces into our lives that create tension. There are three new tensions that are *always* at work in Christian faith. They will be considered here, for they are foundational to the other tensions we will discuss. They are (1) the tension between gift and task, (2) the tension between the new age and the old, and (3) the tension of a life patterned on both the death and the resurrection of Christ.

Gift and Task

New life in Christ is both a *gift* and a *task*. The gospel both grants and demands life. Jesus granted limitless grace to his hearers when he invited tax collectors and sinners to the celebration of God's kingdom. But he also demanded limitless obedience from those who responded.

This blend between fact and command, gift and task, is quite common, particularly in the New Testament epistles. In 1 Peter 1:22–23 we read, "Since you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth so that you have unhypocritical brotherly love [*fact*], love each other fervently from the heart [*command*], because you have been born again [*supporting fact*]." In Romans 6:12 the command is given: "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body," while in Romans 6:14 the fact of the gospel is that "sin will not lord over you."

Such examples could be multiplied easily. The Christian life is lived out in the tension between gift and task in the pursuit of becoming what we already are in Christ. This joining of gift and task is important, for it provides two necessary ingredients that prevent disaster in our lives. The dynamic between Christ's gifts and our tasks is the reason Christian tension is peaceful. The facts of the gospel allow us to relax and rest in God's grace, thus freeing us to deal creatively with the commands of the gospel.

The tension also prevents us from holding a do-nothing religion. We should not be misled to think that God's commands—such as, "Consider yourself dead to sin" (Rom. 6:11)—are pious examples of wishful thinking or an attempt at self-delusion. Rather, they are a call for us to make the gospel real in our lives. They ask us to take seriously what God has done in Christ and to view ourselves as God views us.

The New Age and the Old

A second major reason for tension in Christianity is the overlap between the new age and the old. In many ways this is the most important cause of tension in Christianity. Jesus preached the kingdom of God. In the past, people often debated whether Jesus referred to some future kingdom (Matt. 19:28) or whether he meant that the kingdom had already come in his ministry (Matt. 12:28). There is widespread agreement now that *both* elements were part of Jesus' message. Justice can be done to Jesus' teaching only if we treat fairly both the kingdom as present and the kingdom as future.

The kingdom was *present* in that the promised end-time activity of God to defeat evil and establish righteousness was physically present in Jesus. In Luke 4:18–21 we witness Jesus reading Isaiah 61:1–2 in the synagogue. Afterward he declares, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). The Judaism of Jesus' day associated this passage from Isaiah with God's end-time salvation. In effect, Jesus claimed that God's end-time salvation was here. The future kingdom had invaded the present. In the language of John 4:23, "the hour is coming and now is."

The same assumption of the new age in the midst of the old is expressed in the epistles. Well-known texts like 2 Corinthians 5:17 emphasize the present aspects of the kingdom: "If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. Old things have passed away; behold new things have come into being." In Acts 2:16–21, prophecies concerning the last days are seen as fulfilled. Christians are those "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

We live in the tension between the "now" and the "not yet."

Imagine being in a darkened room with heavy drapes over the windows. Suddenly someone opens the drapes so that you are able to see bright sunshine and a beautiful mountain view all around. You are still in the same room, but a new reality is perceived that changes what life is like in that room. Christians have experienced such a new reality in Christ so that life can no longer be as it was before.

The gospel can be summarized as the proclamation of the new age in the midst of the old, since every theme of our faith is involved in this tension. Our salvation is both present and future. We have already been declared righteous (Rom. 5:1), but we wait for the hope of righteousness (Gal. 5:5). Eternal life is something that we already possess in the present, but we still await eternal life with God in the future. "We are *now* children of God, but it has *not yet* been made known what we will be" (1 John 3:2). The resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit are the crucial factors indicating that the new age has dawned upon us. The presence of the Spirit makes real in our time the things that belong to God's end time. Our task as Christians is to make the new age real in the midst of the old.

If Christianity is founded upon the presence of the new age in the midst of the old and if all the themes of our faith partake of both present and future, the reasons for tension in our lives are clear. We are pulled by the forces of the old age, and at the same time we experience the effects of the new age. We do battle with ourselves: From which reality will we take our identity and "marching orders"?

Death and Resurrection

The third reason for tension is the fact that Christian faith is an identification with both the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The result is the curious injunction to gain life by dying to self.

Identification with the death and resurrection of Christ is virtually the same as Jesus' call to discipleship. We are called to deny self, take up our cross, and follow him (Mark 8:34). Giving up life in order to find it is the dynamic of the faith. There are many who are content to identify with the resurrection of Christ so that they experience joy and God's blessing, but they want nothing to do with identifying with his death in self-giving love. Christianity requires both.

Identification with the death and resurrection of Christ is a main theme in Paul's writings. The classic statement of this idea is found in Romans 6:4: "Therefore, we were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, thus also we might live in newness of life." (See also 2 Cor. 4:10; Gal. 2:19–20; Col. 2:12–3:4.)

Through our oneness with Christ we are identified with Christ's death and resurrection. We should not view his death and resurrection merely as a way to take care of our sin. Christ's death and resurrection are mirrored in our day-to-day lives. The refusal to vent justifiable anger in order to show God's love is one way of mirroring Christ's death and resurrection. If because of God's work in me **I give up my rights in order to accomplish God's purpose**, I identify with Christ's death and resurrection. Any act in which we sacrifice our own will to make God's will possible is a means of dying and rising with Christ. Death and resurrection are the pattern by which we live. Christians are to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the joint sharing in his sufferings as they are conformed to his death" (Phil. 3:10).

It may seem incongruous to identify with death and resurrection at the same time, but according to the New Testament, **we cannot identify with the resurrection without first and continually identifying with the death of Christ**. The dynamic at work is a continual saying no to the possibility of a merely human existence, one that does not take God into account, and a continual saying "yes" to the way of the cross. Any time we give up what we are or what we want to be to become what God intends us to be, we have experienced dying and rising with Christ.

These three tensions—the call to become what we already are in Christ; to live according to the new age in the midst of the old age; and to find life through dying to self—are always at work in Christianity. That is why our faith is marked by a peaceful and creative tension.[12]

[12] Snodgrass, K. (2004). *Between Two Truths: Living with Biblical Tensions* (pp. 13–25). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Peaceful and Creative Tension

Following Christ, however, is no simple matter. The negative tension is removed, but new tension is introduced. As C. F. D. Moule put it, the Christian faith is characterized by a "peaceful and creative tension." The words, at first glance, do not seem to go together, but they accurately describe the New Testament message.

Tension in the Christian life is not like a tightrope where we must fear falling off either side. There would be no peace in that. A more appropriate image is that of a stringed instrument. Properly attached at the two right places, the instrument can be played. If a string is left loose, music cannot be produced. If it is stretched too tightly, the string will break.

Neither does such talk of tension in Christian living refer to anxiety, tenseness, or being destroyed by conflicting options. Nor is there reference to uncertainty, relativity, or straddling the fence. To speak of complexity does not imply that the gospel is confusing. The gospel is clear and is often reducible to simple, basic ideas such as "Abba" (Jesus' unique address to God as Father), "covenant," "love," or "the death and resurrection of Christ." But if each of these expressions represents a simple statement of the gospel, none of them is simplistic. On the contrary, they all are doorways into a new reality that encompasses all of life.

As we will find as we look at various issues from the New Testament, the message of tension within the Christian faith is essentially a discussion of the grace of God. That is why the tension within the Christian faith is first of all peaceful. Our peace has its own struggles. If grace tells us, "You are God's child," it also instructs us, "Now live like it." We have for too long viewed faith as something we "got" at some point, but our relationship with God is a *process* of living with him.

Therefore, the tensions we experience become the stage on which our faith is given creative expression. Working through our struggles and the complexities of life allows us to grow as individuals. Nor is life with Christ a simplistic existence. Life in Christ is not an easy life, for we are called to grow continually by following in the way of the cross. **Christians always live on the edge.** We remain open to God's future and give ourselves to the tasks to which he calls us. Christian maturity, then, requires that we live honestly with biblical tensions. As one British theologian put it, "Anyone unfortunate enough not to experience tensions … is a very superficial person indeed, a non-starter in the Christian stakes."[13]

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[13] Snodgrass, K. (2004). *Between Two Truths: Living with Biblical Tensions* (pp. 32–34). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

The Prime Virtues

Scripture provides three "prime virtues" that are to guide us as we make our way down life's various paths: they are *love, wisdom*, and *integrity*.

Love is the foundation of all our relationships and the expression of our faith. Love is the absolute essential ingredient in all we do. Regardless of how many tensions we recognize, if love does not direct our actions, we are wrong. **Nor should we assume that love and truth will be in tension with each other or that love will seek to evade the truth.** First Corinthians 13:6 states that love *rejoices* with the truth. If God is characterized by love, certainly his people must be as well. But love does not exist as the sole virtue to guide us. Even love must be instructed by wisdom and integrity. Otherwise our love may degenerate into selfish bias and injustice.

Wisdom is needed to guide us as we make decisions about the competing forces causing our tensions. Wisdom is a dominant theme in both testaments. Certain Old Testament books are classified as "wisdom literature" because they focus on wisdom for right living. (These books include works like Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes and also Apocryphal books like the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus.) Many other Old Testament books also focus on wisdom as well so that the message is clear: To live correctly before God is to practice wisdom.

The New Testament emphasizes wisdom just as strongly. Like most letters in the ancient world, nearly all of Paul's epistles contain a prayer just after the initial words of greeting. Often **Paul's prayer is a request for wisdom and understanding** so that the people will know how to live their lives in Christ. The prayer for the Philippians is particularly instructive: "I pray that your love may increase yet more and more in knowledge and understanding so that you may approve the things that really matter" (Phil. 1:9–10; see also Eph. 1:17–19; 3:14–19; Col. 1:9–12). In effect, Paul prays that they will have wise love.

When the Bible focuses on wisdom, usually the concern is for moral discernment, discretion, and practical skill. The real issue is the ability to read a situation and make the appropriate decisions for right living. The call to wisdom is a call to productive and practical discernment.

The third prime virtue is *integrity*. Integrity is needed to make sure that we act responsibly with the tension that confronts us. It will not allow us to slight any of the truths or persons that we face. The word *integrity* does not appear often in translations of the Bible, but one of the main purposes of scripture is to bring integrity to our lives. The repeated commands in the Bible to speak truth are really a call to integrity. **If a person has integrity, he or she is a "unified whole." There is unity between what is said and what is done.** What counts is the *quality* and *integrity* of our compromises between the truths facing us.[14]

[14] Snodgrass, K. (2004). *Between Two Truths: Living with Biblical Tensions* (pp. 37–40). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

The Whole Truth

Once the Devil was walking along with one of his cohorts. They saw a man ahead of them pick up something shiny. "What did he find?" asked the cohort. "A piece of the truth," the Devil replied. "Doesn't it bother you that he found a piece of the truth?" asked the cohort. "No," said the Devil, "I will see to it that he makes a religion out of it."

Understanding and accepting tension changes how we view truth. Too often Christians are content to possess a piece of the truth. If not a religion, at least they make a denomination from the partial knowledge. The root problem is usually a very narrow understanding of the nature of truth.

By *truth* we usually mean "true statements or facts," somewhat akin to Detective Joe Friday's "Just the facts, Ma'am." Many times the Bible does use "truth" with reference to true facts. The Bible's concept of truth, however, is much broader than this.

The Old Testament word usually translated "truth" is from the root that means "firm" or "stable." Often the word carries the connotation of "faithfulness, trustworthiness, or steadiness." The principal idea is that truth can be relied on. When truth is used of people or God, **the emphasis on reliability assumes that truth is *relational*. Truth in this case is correspondence between words and actions. Truth assumes a relationship where expectations are fulfilled, claims are met, and confidence is justified.**

Truth, then, in the Bible is a multifaceted concept. This is important. If truth is understood merely as not telling a lie, it becomes easy for us to equate truth with the reality that we ourselves see. We think we can grasp the truth; we remain oblivious to the fact that much of reality—much of God's truth—has not even been considered by us.

If truth is broader than humans collectively can grasp, truth is certainly broader than we as individuals can grasp. No one person can perceive all the truth that is available to humanity. The point is not merely that there are fields of expertise. Rather, no individual can experience enough or learn enough to do justice to the complexity of our lives. We need each other to understand truth. That is part of what it means to be human.[15]

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[15] Snodgrass, K. (2004). *Between Two Truths: Living with Biblical Tensions* (pp. 35–36). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

JUSTIFICATION: By Faith or Works?

By **Wayne Jackson**

Is justification from sin by faith or works? Does it result from neither, one as opposed to the other, or both? One would expect that such a fundamental question could be answered clearly and confidently, with a united declaration, by those who profess a devout regard for the testimony of the Scriptures. Sadly, such is not the case.

The more strict disciples of Calvin, for example, contend that there are no conditions at all in the plan of salvation. In 1957, G.E. Griffin, a cleric for the Primitive Baptist Church, affirmed, in debate with Guy N. Woods:

"The Scriptures teach that the alien sinner comes into possession of Spiritual or Eternal life, without any condition on his, the sinner's part" (p. 6).

These folks do not even acknowledge that faith is a condition of salvation. Sarrels, a Primitive Baptist writer, stated:

> "[W]e believe that there is no warrant whatever for the view that John 1:16 lays down faith as a condition to be performed by the lost person in order to attain spiritual or eternal life" (p. 444).

At the opposite extreme, there are those who contend, at least by implication, that works effect salvation apart from faith. Every group that practices infant baptism must concede that whatever advantage the baptism of a baby is alleged to have, it is not associated with faith, since no infant can personally believe. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism may be administered to those who are unconscious or insane (Attwater, pp. 44,45). Clearly, some endorse the idea that works save — and that without faith.

Then, there is the common claim of many Protestants that faith alone saves. The Discipline of the Methodist Church states:

"Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort" (p. 40).

But elsewhere in the same volume, it is argued that the "benefits of the atonement" are "unconditional" (p. 55) — a clear contradiction. The doctrine of salvation by "faith only" is not wholesome, and the comfort is deceptive.

Again, another sectarian body contends that justification is "solely through faith in Christ" (Hiscox, p. 62). It is hardly necessary to point out that if salvation is "solely" through faith, then repentance is excluded from heaven's plan of redemption — if the word "solely" is assigned its legitimate meaning.

On the other hand, the same writer later contends that both repentance and faith are

"inseparable graces, wrought in the soul by the regenerating Spirit of God; whereby being deeply convinced of our guilt, danger, and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God . . ." (p. 64).

Which is it? Is salvation "solely" by faith? Or are both faith and repentance requisites for turning to God? The statements are not consistent.

Martin Luther was so adamant regarding the doctrine of "faith only" that he smuggled the word "only" into the text of his German translation in Romans 3:28. Lenski, a Lutheran commentator, attempted to defend Luther's addition to the Word (cf. Rev. 22:18) by suggesting that although the term "only" is not found in the original text, the "sense" is (1961, p. 271).

Shall we conclude that Luther was more adept at rendering the "sense" than Paul was?

The Role of Works in the Divine Plan

It is frequently asserted that whereas "works" are the result of salvation, they do not play any role in the securing of one's redemption. There is simply no truth to this allegation. Faith, repentance, and immersion are all conditions preliminary to the reception of salvation (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38).

Jesus affirmed that the one who has believed, and who has been immersed, shall be saved (Mk. 16:16). The construction of the Greek grammar makes it certain that both belief and baptism precede salvation. The Lord did **not** suggest that one may be saved in the absence of both faith and baptism. He did **not** contend that he who is baptized is saved, and that without faith. He did **not** state that he who believes is saved, and may optionally submit to baptism. The more complete picture involves faith, immersion, and salvation — in that order.

It is utterly incredible that some, professing an acquaintance with the New Testament, deny the role of works (obedience) in the sacred scheme of redemption. Jesus plainly taught that one must "work" for that spiritual sustenance which abides unto eternal life (Jn. 6:27), and that even faith itself is a divinely appointed "work" (Jn. 6:29).

Elsewhere the inspired apostle admonished Christians to be careful that they "lose not" the things which they had "wrought" [worked for] (2 Jn. 1:8). Christians have a faith that works (Gal. 5:6); indeed, they are to "work out" their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), abounding in good works (2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:10), being constantly aware of the fact that they will be judged by their deeds (Mt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17).

There has been much controversy over the instruction within the book of James regarding faith and works. Clearly, James taught that justification is as much by works as it is by faith (2:21) — a concept which Luther found so obnoxious that he rejected the inspiration of the document, called it a "right strawy epistle," and suggested that the book was not even authored by James (Lenski, 1966, p. 515).

But the divine writer unequivocally affirmed that faith without works cannot save (2:14). Is he speaking of the alien sinner, or the Christian? The question is academic — James is discussing the principle of faithful obedience — to whomever it applies; whether an Abraham, or a Rahab.

The Role of "Works" in God's Plan of Redemption

By **Wayne Jackson**

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Most Protestants, reacting adversely to the "works system" of Roman Catholicism, have adopted the extreme (and unscriptural) view that works play *no role* whatever in human salvation. Some allege that salvation is on the basis of "faith alone," while others (e.g., radical Calvinists) argue that God chose the redeemed before the world began, and that redemption, therefore, is entirely *unconditional.*

"But is it not true" someone is bound to argue, "that the Scriptures state that we are *not* saved by works (Eph. 2:9)?" Yes, that is correct. But it is also the case that the New Testament asserts that we *are* saved, i.e., justified, by works (Jas. 2:14,24). Since the Bible, being the word of God, does not contradict itself, there must be a sensible solution to this seeming difficulty. How is the problem to be resolved?

Well, it is not (as Luther suggested) that one is at liberty to repudiate the book of James as an inspired document! Rather, the careful student must recognize that there are *different kinds* of works addressed in the divine record. Let us give brief consideration to this matter with a spirit of genuine investigation.

Works of the Law

In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes it clear that no one can be saved by keeping the works of Moses' law. The apostle argued that "a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (3:28). The term "law" in this passage is broader than the Mosaic system, though it certainly includes that law.

This certainly does not suggest, however, that *obedience to Christ* may be ignored with impunity. In the same epistle, Paul affirmed that these saints in Rome had embraced freedom from the penalty of sin as a result of having been "obedient from the heart" to the "pattern of teaching" whereby they were delivered (6:17; cf. 3-4).

The works of the Mosaic law could not save because they required perfect compliance (Gal. 3:10b), which no person could achieve. Moreover, the regime of Moses had only the blood of animals, which could not atone for sin in the absolute sense (Heb. 10:4). The primary focus of the Hebrew system was to direct attention to the coming Messiah (Gal. 3:24-25); it was never designed to provide the ultimate phase of God's plan of salvation. Had the Mosaic law that kind of power, Christ need never have died as the sin-offering (Gal. 2:21).

Works of Human Merit

In his Ephesian letter, Paul wrote: "[F]or by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works that no man should glory" (2:8-9).

The works here excluded are charitable works which men pile up, imagining that such will justify them, while they, with a smug self-sufficiency, ignore the sacrifice of Christ and his redemptive system.

The Red Cross is famous for its benevolent efforts, but there is no justification to be found therein, because its "works" are mere human benevolent efforts, wholly divorced from the mission of the Son of God. The man who boasts: "I am a good person; I do not need Jesus Christ," is guilty of the same mistake.

Works of Obedience

There are works mentioned in the Bible that are designated as "works of God."By this expression it is not implied that these are works which God *himself* performs. Rather, they are works *ordained of God,* to be obeyed by men, that are indispensable to salvation.

Consider a text in John, chapter 6. The disciples inquired of the Lord: "What must *we do,* that we may work the works of God?"

Jesus responded: "This is the work of God that you believe on him who he has sent" (vv. 28-29). Observe that this "work of [from] God" required a human response — that of believing. Regarding the term "work," as here used, J.H. Thayer commented: "... the works required and approved by God" (**Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament,** Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1958, p. 248).

The term "works" is sometimes the equivalent of "obedience." Elsewhere Jesus promised victory to those who "keep my works," i.e., the works (commands) prescribed by him (Rev. 2:26). If, therefore, all "works" are excluded from the plan of salvation, faith itself would be eliminated, for it is identified as a work.

It must be noted as well that "repentance" is a component in God's scheme of redemption (Acts 2:38; 3:19). And yet, repentance is classified as a "work." Jesus once said that the people of ancient Nineveh "repented" when Jonah preached to them (Mt. 12:41). The book of Jonah explains the meaning of this. God saw their "works, that they turned from their evil way" (3:10). There is no question about it, works — of a *certain sort* — are a part of the salvation process.

Is Baptism a Work of Merit?

The truth is, most denominational folks have little difficulty in acknowledging that both faith and repentance are requirements for the remission of sins, even though they are classified as works in the Scriptures. The real point of contention is baptism. Sectarians feel that if it were conceded that baptism is essential to salvation, this would be equivalent to arguing that forgiveness is earned. Baptism, it is charged, is a work of *human merit.* Under this assumption, it is thus (by many sincere people) excluded as a requirement for salvation. But this reasoning is fallacious.

In the first place, the only passage in the New Testament that even remotely identifies baptism as a "work" is found in the book of Colossians. There, Paul says "[H]aving been buried with him in baptism, wherein you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12, ASV).

The act of submitting to immersion is not meritorious; the operation is a "working of God" designed to provide pardon upon the basis of Jesus' death. One is spiritually blessed by the working of God when he submits to the sacred ordinance. Nowhere does scripture come anywhere near suggesting that submission to God's command, "be baptized" (Acts 2:38; 22:16), is a *meritorious* work.

Second, the Bible specifically *excludes* baptism from that type of works that have no relationship to salvation. Paul, in his letter to Titus, affirmed that we are "not [saved] by works done in righteousness which we did ourselves," i.e., which we contrived and implemented as a means of justification. Rather, "according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (3:5). The "washing of regeneration" (an indisputable allusion to baptism) is plainly placed in contrast to those human "works" that are ineffectual to save.

The conscientious Bible student needs to eradicate from his mind the false notion that "works" are wholly alien to God's plan of salvation. If you have been confused about the role of works in the divine pattern of conversion, why not give the matter fresh consideration?

"Law and Grace"

Posted byMark MayberryMay 1, 2012

By Lindy McDaniel

Trying to harmonize the concepts of "law" and "grace" has been a difficult task for Bible students for hundreds of years. The difficulty primarily centers on the writings of Paul, and especially as students grapple with the problem of harmonizing Paul's writings with those of James. Paul wrote: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Rom. 3:28). However, James said: "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). Some have concluded that salvation by God's grace excludes obedience. Others maintain that one must obey God in order to be saved.

It is a dangerous practice to attempt to interpret some of the difficult writings of Paul apart from other scripture that hear on the same subjects. Peter warns: "Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote, to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness" (2 Pet. 3:14-17). Paul's writings have been perverted, resulting in great harm.

Salvation By Grace

Paul taught that salvation is by grace and not by works of law. He wrote: "Now to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteous" (Rom. 4:4-5). Again, "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under' law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! " (Rom. 6:14-15). "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Salvation By Works

Salvation is also attributed to works in the following passages: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). "And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). Paul even emphasizes obedience in his great epistle on salvation by grace through faith written to the Romans: ". . . through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake" (Rom. 1:5). "For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil.... but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:19,26). Evidently, Paul had no trouble reconciling "faith" and "obedience." Also study carefully James 2:14-26, 2 Cor. 10:5; Gal. 5:7; Gal. 6:4; Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Thess. 1:6-8; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; 2 Thess. 3:14-15, etc.

Not Under Law

Paul wrote that the Christians in Rome were not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). Does this mean that Christians are not under any law whatsoever, or that obedience has nothing to do with justification?

Paul wrote much about "the law" or "law" and it is important to understand that he almost always had in mind the "law of Moses." John wrote: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1: 17). Those addressed by Paul were familiar with the "law of Moses," but they did not have access to all of the New Testament writings, which contain "the faith" revealed through Christ. The great controversy of apostolic days was whether or not the "law of Moses" was to be bound upon the Gentiles in order for them to be saved (see Acts 15:1, 6-11; Gal. 2:16-2 1; 3:1-3; 5:14). It is quite obvious that Christians are not under the Law of Moses; but this does not mean that Christians are without Law.

Furthermore, we are not under any law system that demands perfect obedience in order to be saved. The Mosaical Code was that kind of law system. Paul wrote: "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.' Now that no one is justified by the law before God is evident; for, the righteous man shall live by faith.' However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'he who practices them shall live by them!' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-for it is written, I cursed is every one who hangs on a tree' " (Gal. 3: 1013). Law condemns every man who has sinned, and all men are convicted as lawbreakers; but Jesus Christ has delivered us from the curse of the law.

Even though Christians are not under the Mosaical Code, or any law system that demands human perfection, we are under law to Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: "And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are under the Law" G Cor. 9:20-21). Paul, even though lie was a Jew, did not consider himself to be tinder the law of Moses, but he was under law to Christ. Paul brought himself under the first, not as being necessary to salvation, but as a custom. However, he was bound by the law of Christ, which is also called "the law of liberty" (James 1:25).

The scriptures teach that all men are tinder the rule of Jesus Christ. Jesus said: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). Paul wrote of Jesus Christ: "And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1: 15-17). ". . . who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to him" (1 Pet. 3:22). The whole world is under the authority of Jesus Christ.

If grace has released us from the obligation of law, as some contend, then it would be impossible for a Christian to sin, for "where there is no law, neither is there violation" (Rom. 4:15). "Every one who practices sin also practices lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (I John 3:4); but there can be no lawlessness unless there is a law.

But all men have been pronounced guilty before God (Rom. 3:23), and besides all of this, even Christians do sin: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Christians are not free from law. But they are free from the curse of the law through Jesus Christ. If and when they sin, they may gain forgiveness through the blood and advocacy of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 1:7-10; 2:1-2).

Law And Justification

Some argue, "Yes, the Christian is under law, but he is not under law as a basis of justification." In answer to this, let us first realize that the principal foundation of justification before God is "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." God's grace, and our justification, centers on Jesus Christ, the son of God (see 2 Cor. 5:19; 6: 1; 8:9; Heb. 10: 5-7; 10:10, 14, etc.). This fundamental fact being understood, the important question is simply this: "Must a person obey God in order to be justified by the blood of -Jesus?" To this question, I emphatically say, "Yes!" That obedience to Christ is essential to salvation is abundantly clear in scripture. Peter writes: "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22). See also Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:17-18; etc.)

If a person is not under law as a condition of salvation, then his violation of law would not affect his salvation; yet the scriptures teach that the "lawless" and "ungodly" cannot inherit eternal life. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Tit. 2.11-13). "Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying" (Rev. 22:15).

A Christian may be "overtaken in a trespass" and need to be restored (Gal. 6: 1), or he may so sin as to lose his inheritance in Jesus Christ (Gal. 5:4; Heb. 6:4-8; Heb. 10:26-31; 2 Pet. 2:19-22). Thus, obedience has a direct bearing on our relationship with Jesus Christ. No, the Christian is not "free" from law.

Again, God will judge us according to our deeds done in the body. "And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds" (Rev. 20:12). Read also Rom. 2:5-16; 2 Thess. 1:6-8; and I Peter 4:17.

Faith And Obedience

Again, it is argued, "The Bible teaches that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law" (see Rom. 3-28; Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2-89; Tit. 3:5-7, etc.). The "works" under consideration by Paul in these passages are those works which are meritorious in nature. By doing such works, a man may be said to have earned salvation. Since all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and continue to commit acts of sin 0 John 1:8), earning justification is rendered impossible. Justification is a gift and cannot be earned by human effort (Rom. 11:6). From these facts, some have foolishly concluded that it is not necessary to obey God in order to receive justification; but nothing could be further from the truth.

"Faith And Obedience"

The gifts of God, although never earned by human effort, are frequently conditioned upon human effort. God healed Naaman, the Syrian Commander, of leprosy; but before this was accomplished, Naaman had to dip seven times in the river Jordan (see 2 Kings 5:10-14).

God gave Jericho into the hands of the Israelites, but it was required that they march around the walls a total of 13 times as prescribed by God (see Josh. 6). God gives us food and raiment; but these "good gifts" are not obtained apart from human effort. Apart from God's grace, Naaman could not have been healed of leprosy; the Israelites could not have captured Jericho, and we could not be fed and clothed. These are simple but powerful illustrations of the grace of God. Do not be deceived into thinking that, free gifts" cannot be conditioned upon human effort.

Salvation can be compared to a drowning man who is rescued. His small boat capsizes and sinks, and he is left helpless in the water unable to swim. A rescue boat approaches and a rope is thrown out to him. He grabs the rope and is pulled out of the water into the boat. He has been saved by the rescue men. Yet it was necessary for him to grab hold of the rope. Are you willing to "grab hold of the rope," or do you foolishly think that God is going to do it all for you?

Our justification is conditioned upon faith. Human works of merit are centered on man, whereas faith is centered on God. Faith is the ground of our complete confidence in the unseen realm based upon the testimony of God (2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11:1-2; Rom. 10:17). Faith is expressed in obedience to God (Heb. 11: 4, 7, 8, 17, 24, 27; James 2:14-28). Thus, the Christian "walks by faith" (2 Cor. 5:7).

Again, it is protested, "Justification is based upon faith alone, and not obedience!" "Of course," they reason, "faith always produces good works." This is like trying to separate cause and effect or the tree from its fruits. Such distinctions have resulted in much confusion. Faith is perfected through works (James 2:22). The tree is always known by its fruits (Matt. 7:26). How can a man know that he has faith unless he is willing to do what Christ commands? Faith apart from works is dead (James 2:26).

Those who emphasize the necessity of "faith" while denying the necessity of "obedience" are making a serious mistake. Faith apart from works has no more power to save than works apart from faith. Inward perfection is no more possible than outward perfection. The concepts of salvation by "faith only" and salvation by "works only" are both "legalistic" in that attention is centered upon man himself. But genuine faith is centered upon God. This kind of faith does not question God's grace, purposes, or plan of human redemption. It is a trusting and obedient faith. It never argues around God's law; it seeks only to obey it. What kind of faith do you have?

Some preachers among us are beginning to accept "denominational" concepts of "grace" and "love." They are teaching that justification is conditioned upon faith apart from obedience to the laws of Jesus Christ. They admit that baptism is included in the "principle of faith" as a condition of salvation; but they deny that "observing all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded" is embraced by the principle. It is said that obedience to Christ inevitably flows from faith, but it is faith itself that saves. With the exception of baptism being included in the principle of faith, this is what many "denominations" have been teaching for hundreds of years. Are we ready for this?

TRUTH MAGAZINE XVII: 24, pp.5-8

Are We Under Law or Grace?

By **Wayne Jackson**

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Why do some insist that Christians are under law today? We are not under law, but grace. The law came by Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus (Jn. 1:17).

We must respectfully point out that the question recorded above reflects a serious misunderstanding of the nature of both law and grace. And it misrepresents the nature of the religious system to which men are amenable today.

It is a tragedy of enormous magnitude that some, waving the banner of grace, argue that they are free from the constraints of sacred law and thus are at liberty to forge their own route along the religious terrain.

One cannot but be reminded of Jude's indictment of certain persons who pervert God's grace to accommodate their own sensual goals (Jude 4).

John 1:17 — Law and Grace

The beloved apostle records these words in John 1:17:

> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Here, the terms "law" and "grace" are employed to designate the **predominate systems** of divine, written revelation—namely the two covenants.

The first covenant was that given through Moses at Sinai, commonly known as the law of Moses. The second was a universal covenant for mankind that issued from Jesus Christ, and was ratified by the Lord's death (Mt. 26:28).

Jeremiah referred to these respective systems as "the covenant" that Jehovah made with the fathers when he brought them out of Egyptian bondage, and the "new covenant" which later would be world-wide in scope (Jer. 31:31-34). The writer of the book of Hebrews referred to these laws as the first and the second (Heb. 8:7), or the old and the new (Heb. 8:13).

In the text under review (Jn. 1:17), the two covenants are designated respectively as "law" and "grace." And there is a very logical explanation for these appellations. It has to do with the **prevailing themes** characteristic of these systems.

The function of the Mosaic law was as follows:

1. To demonstrate that the violation of divine law separates the perpetrator from God (Isa. 59:1-2).
2. To declare that written law is needed to define sin (Rom. 7:7).
3. To show, by recorded precedent, that sacred justice requires that a penalty be paid for law-breaking (Rom. 3:26; 1 Cor. 10:5ff).

On the other hand, the dominant design of the New Covenant is to stress the **redemptive mission** of Christ as the only remedy for the human sin problem (Mt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 15:3). The wonderful plan of salvation is the result of Heaven's grace (Eph. 2:8-9), not human merit. No richer term, than that of grace, could be employed as a synecdoche (the part put for the whole) for the summation of God's thrilling scheme of redemption.

It is entirely reasonable, therefore, that these two systems should be set forth in a contrasted fashion, such as law and grace.

Abusing the Text

It is a baffling mystery as to how anyone, with even a cursory knowledge of Scripture, should not understand that there was an abundant measure of grace under the law of Moses.

Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord long before the Mosaic system was birthed (Gen. 6:8), but it was not the modern sort of cheap grace that disavows obedience (Gen. 6:22; cf. Heb. 11:7).

Scores of Old Testament passages stress the pouring out of Jehovah's grace in ancient times upon those who responded in obedience to his will (cf. Ex. 33:13; Dt. 7:12; Jer. 31:3).

It is no surprise that many today are ready to repudiate the idea that man is responsible to sacred law. Outlaws despise law!

The reality is, this irresponsible suggestion — that folks today are "under grace" as **opposed** to law — is so trifling that it would scarcely be worthy of a rebuttal were it not for the fact that it is so common.

The notion has absolutely no sanction in Scripture.

No Law Today?

Were it the case that man is not under law in this era of time, then it would follow necessarily that **sin would not exist today**, for sin is a transgression of the law (1 Jn. 3:4). As Paul once noted, where there is no law, there is no sin (Rom. 4:15).

By way of contrast, since it obviously is the case that men (even Christians) do sin in this era (1 Jn. 1:8—2:2), the compelling implication is that there is a divine law to which men now are amenable.

The Christian-era Law of God in Prophecy

The Old Testament prophets, in previewing the coming of the Christian age ("grace"), spoke of a time in which the **law of God** would be **obligatory**.

Isaiah, for instance, spoke of the days of the new covenant, when Jehovah's "law" would go forth from Zion (Is. 2:2-4). The term "law" renders an original term suggesting "instruction" considered as a "rule of duty" (Young 1965, 106).

Similarly, when Jeremiah spoke of the "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31ff), he made it the equivalent of God's law, which would take up residence in man's heart (Jer. 31:33).

A King Is on His Throne

When Jesus Christ is repeatedly depicted as a king in the biblical record, clearly the concept is set forth that he exercises an **authority** to which men are expected to comply.

If this is not law, there is no meaning to such terms as king, rule, reign, submit, obey, etc. (see Mt. 2:2; 28:18; Lk. 19:14, 27; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9-10; Heb. 5:9; Rev. 1:5; 19:16).

Law Respected By Apostles

The inspired writers of the New Testament viewed the authority of the regime of Christ as one of law.

Our freedom from the condemning effect of sin is the result of our submission to the "law of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:2). The expression "law of the Spirit" is the same as the gospel, the new covenant system.

It is "of the Spirit" because it was conveyed by the Spirit's direction. It is designated as law because it is an "expression of the divine will" and a "rule of conduct" (Lard n.d., 247).

Elsewhere, Paul acknowledged that he was "under law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). Additionally, to the Galatians he gives this admonition:

> Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the **law of Christ** (Gal. 6:2).

Finally, if the inspired James is not referring to the present order of things, when he alluded to the "perfect law" (Jas. 1:25), of what was he speaking?

Conclusion

A consideration of the foregoing facts ought to enable the conscientious Bible student to see John 1:17 in a balanced light.

Furthermore, it should forever banish the absurd notion that our modern world is exempt from the restraints of sacred law


Do not be overcome by evil, but
overcome evil with good.
Romans 12:21
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Do Not
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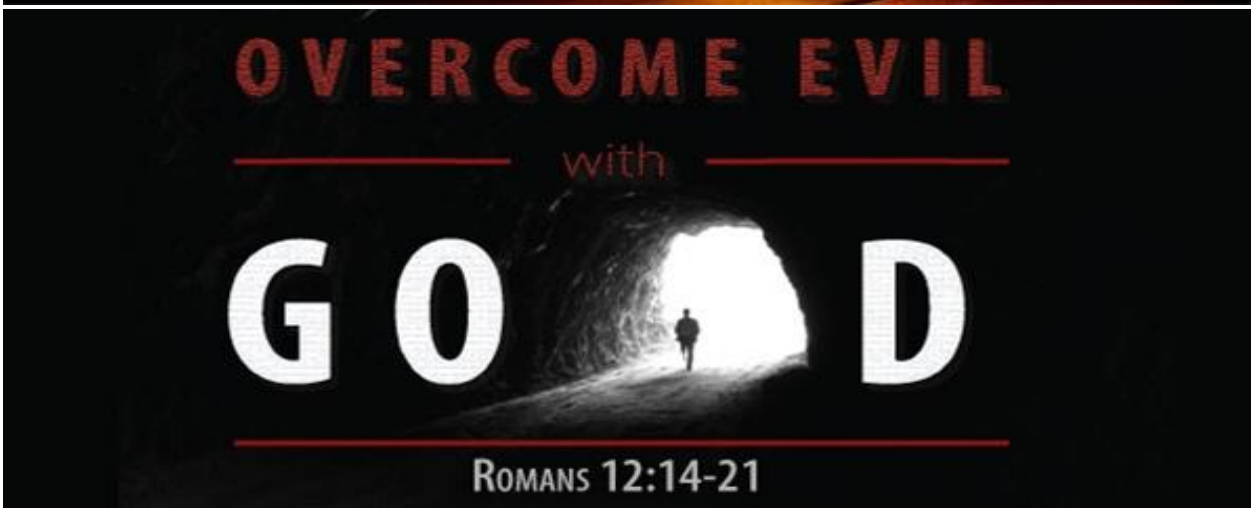
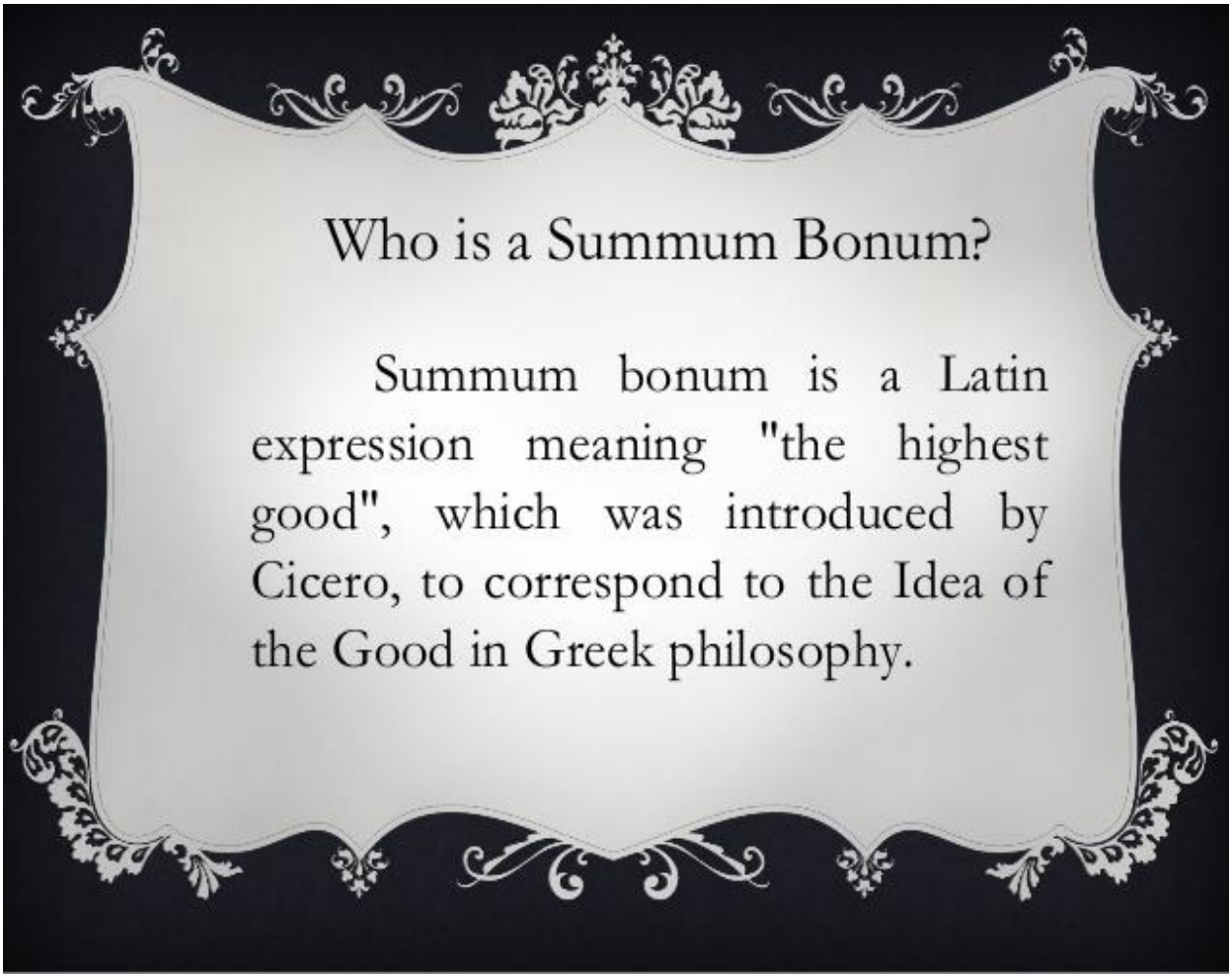
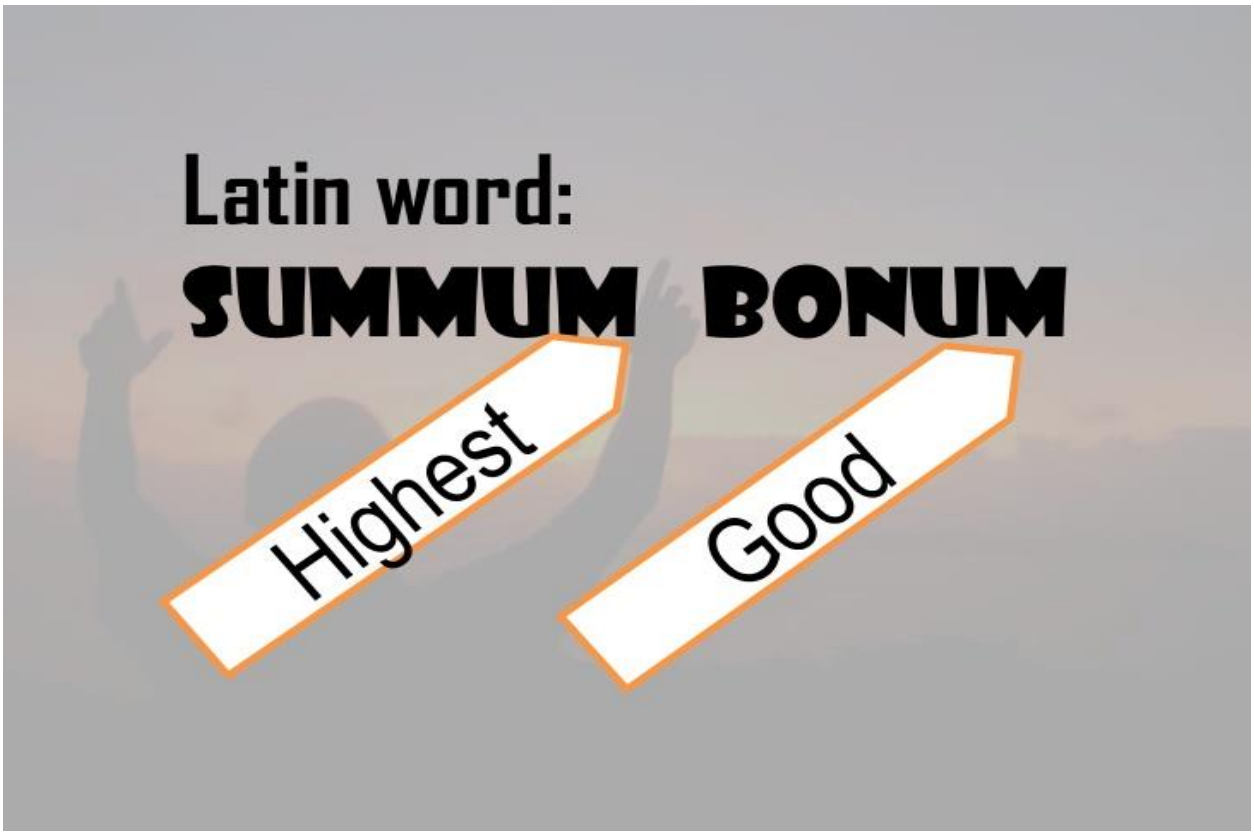
ROMANS
BUT
OVERCOME
BY
EVIL
12:21 (ESV)
EVIL WITH
GOOD


OVERCOME EVIL
with
GOD
ROMANS 12:14-21

Summun Bonum:

PROCESSES OF HIGHEST LOVE & OUTCOMES OF GREATEST GOOD




Latin word:
SUMMUM BONUM
Highest
Good


"SUMMUM BONUM
(THE HIGHEST GOOD)

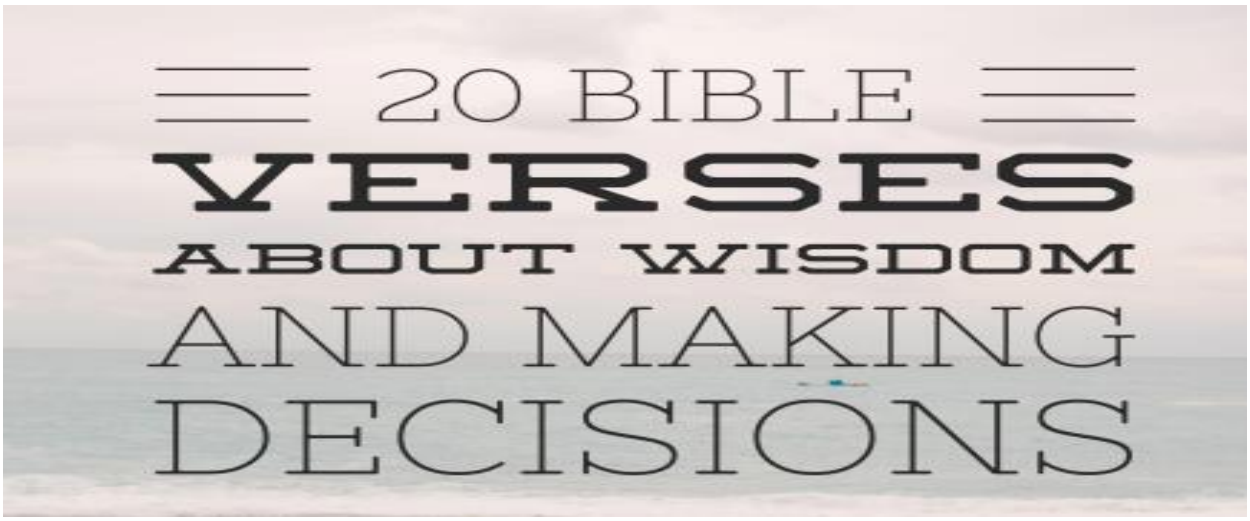
Summun Bonum:

OPTIMIZED DECISIONMAKING IN COMBINATION OF APPROACHS

These are only two moral decision making models in philosophy and neither are necessarily the ideal. The ideal moral decision-making process must combine the strengths of consequentialism and deontology while attempting to compensate for their errors.

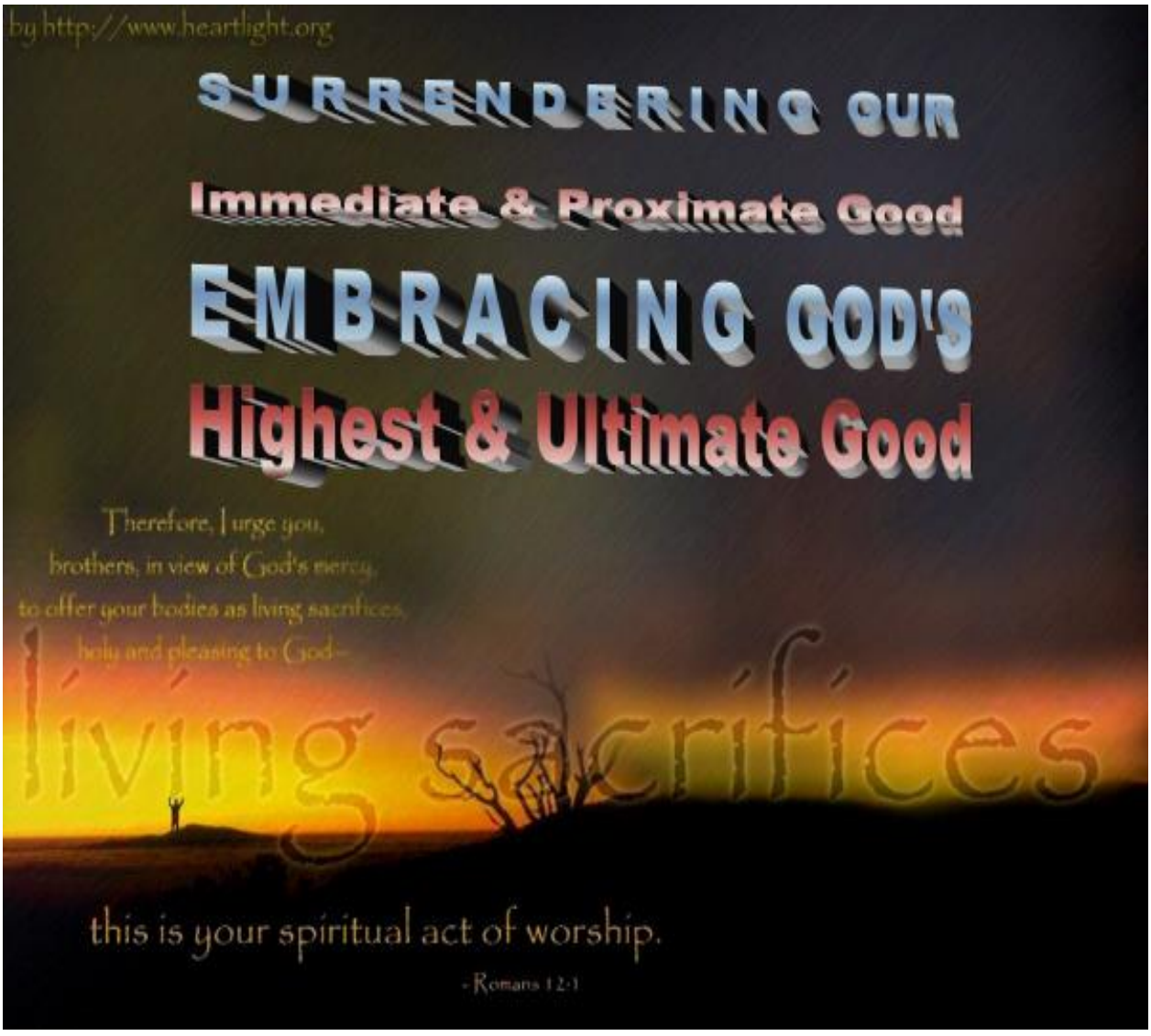
By forcing an individual to take into account how their decision will affect them rather than society leads to better moral decisions being made. This combination decision making theory will additionally make use of the principle of utility which teaches individuals to do the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people. This combined with deontology's focus on the individual's rights dissipates the [process] danger of consequentialism as means to a morally right end.

Consequentialism is important because it focuses on results of an action for good of humanity. Deontology forces the moral agent to take responsibility for their actions instead of relying on someone else to care, just as important to maintaining moral societal standards. Together the two create checks and balances, which, when combined with an individual's beliefs, allow for moral decision making with limited room for error.



- Psalm 19:8 ESV
  the precepts of the Lord are right,
  rejoicing the heart;
  the commandment of the Lord is pure,
  enlightening the eyes;
- Psalm 25:12 ESV
  Who is the man who fears the Lord?
  Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.
- Psalm 119:9 ESV
  How can a young man keep his way pure?
  By guarding it according to your word.
- Proverbs 1:5 ESV
  Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
  and the one who understands obtain guidance,
- Proverbs 2:1-5 ESV
  My son, if you receive my words
  and treasure up my commandments with you,
  2 making your ear attentive to wisdom
  and inclining your heart to understanding;
  3 yes, if you call out for insight
  and raise your voice for understanding,
  4 if you seek it like silver
  and search for it as for hidden treasures,
  5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord
  and find the knowledge of God.
- Proverbs 2:6 ESV
  For the Lord gives wisdom;
  from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
- Proverbs 1:5 ESV
  Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
  and the one who understands obtain guidance,

- Proverbs 3:5-6 ESV
  Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
  and do not lean on your own understanding.
  6 In all your ways acknowledge him,
  and he will make straight your paths.
- Proverbs 11:14 ESV
  Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
  but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.
- Proverbs 12:15 ESV
  The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
  but a wise man listens to advice.
- Proverbs 13:20 ESV
  Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,
  but the companion of fools will suffer harm.
- Proverbs 15:22 ESV
  Without counsel plans fail,
  but with many advisers they succeed.
- Proverbs 16:9 ESV
  The heart of man plans his way,
  but the Lord establishes his steps.
- Isaiah 30:21 ESV
  And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.
- Jeremiah 6:16 ESV
  Thus says the Lord:
  “Stand by the roads, and look,
  and ask for the ancient paths,
  where the good way is; and walk in it,
  and find rest for your souls.
  But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’
- Jeremiah 33:3 ESV
  Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.
- Philippians 4:6 ESV
  do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
- 2 Timothy 3:16 ESV
  All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
- James 1:5 ESV
  If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.
- James 3:17 ESV
  But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.


by http://www.heartlight.org
SURRENDERING OUR
Immediate & Proximate Good
EMBRACING GOD'S
Highest & Ultimate Good
Therefore, I urge you,
brothers, in view of God's mercy,
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices,
holy and pleasing to God—
living sacrifices
this is your spiritual act of worship.
- Romans 12:1

"What you decide today will determine what you experience tomorrow."

– Terry Slack, Memorial Gospel Meeting