



Making Moral Decisions

SESSION 1

| *Why Christians Should Be Moral*

Introduction

Most people assume that there is an important relationship between religion and morality. Many believe that persons of faith are more trustworthy than skeptics, that to believe in God tends to prompt or ensure good behavior. They may also assume that religion reinforces a resolve to be good, that people of deep religious convictions will maintain their moral integrity even when doing so is difficult or costly.

There is much to render this view plausible. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often described as “ethical monotheisms.” Indeed, the moral and ethical teachings of these religions are often considered to constitute their most valuable feature. There are, however, counterindications. Many religious critics point out that belief in God is often associated with violence. They rightly observe that religion has frequently been oppressive. Religious believers often seem as prone to moral weakness as are those who do not profess belief. Some Christian religious leaders have recently made headlines for their shortcomings—whether priests in strict orders or popular television evangelists.

These contrasting perceptions invite a more careful look at how religious faith relates to moral conduct. The Bible indicates that this relationship is far from being simple. The very people who are portrayed in the Bible as recipients of God’s special favor are also described as sometimes being unethical. They are punished for transgressions even after receiving God’s favor. The Bible does not necessarily regard them as less moral or more moral than others: in the Bible, those who have received special favor are especially obligated to respond to



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God’s favor by living righteously, but the Bible also recognizes that this does not always happen. Any biblically informed understanding of how faith is related to morality will give pause to the simplistic assumption that religious faith is always and decisively an indicator of moral righteousness.

Morality as a Response to Grace

While many people focus on the question of whether or not religious people are more moral than nonreligious people, the Bible poses a different question. Instead of asking whether or not religion engenders or inspires moral behavior, the Bible is mainly concerned with whether or not morality is the means to obtain God’s approval or (in contrast) if morality is the result of being the beneficiary of God’s loving concern. This can be seen in much of what the Bible contains in the way of moral commentary and in the very structure of the biblical narrative itself. There is no question that biblical faith has moral implications, but the nature of those implications is placed in a whole new perspective. Hence, we are prompted to think more carefully about what those

implications are and how they work themselves out in the lives of individuals and the characteristics of the faithful community.

For instance, the deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt preceded any mention of moral duty. God did not send Moses to the people in Egypt with a set of moral tests they had to pass in order to be freed from their bondage. They were freed first—by the mighty saving work of God offered to them without any prior moral demands. Only after they were freed were they provided with moral advice—guidance set forth in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17) but also in the more specific Covenant Code (Exod. 20:23–23:33), the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26), as well as the book of Deuteronomy. All of these moral (and ritual) counsels followed Israel’s election and its release from Egypt. They indicate many different ways in which a people grateful for their salvation understood what is an appropriate moral response. As contemporary readers of the Bible we do not regard every one of these requirements as obligatory for us, so we are always confronted with making faith-informed judgments about how our behavior is to be shaped by these materials.

Much of the Old Testament’s sense of how morality is related to salvation can also be seen in the New Testament. The disciples were not selected because they had attained exemplary moral stature. Jesus called and embraced the disciples out of saving compassion and outpoured love, not out of admiration for their virtue. To be sure, both by his teaching and by his example, Jesus led his followers toward lives of moral concern, but he loved them even when they did not entirely measure up to his expectations.

Getting It Backwards

Perhaps even more clearly and explicitly than in the Old Testament, the New Testament scrutinizes the stance and behavior of those who would make morality the means to salvation rather than a response to saving grace. The tensions between Jesus and Pharisees (and to a lesser extent between Jesus and the Sadducees) did not arise because one of them was moral and the other was not: these tensions arose over the role that morality plays in relationship to faith. With the passage of time, the pattern evident in Exodus, where the law is given after and in response to the release from Egypt (and is therefore a response to divine grace), was later replaced with a pat-

tern in which obedience to the law came to function as a means of proving one’s faithfulness. In different ways, both the Pharisees and the Sadducees tended to see the law as the means to earn or merit salvation. A major group of Old Testament writings, like those of Deuteronomy, Proverbs, several of the Psalms, and Ezekiel, presumed a correlation between ethical living and good fortune—suggesting that the good fortune depended on the ethical living. The result was that many determined and devout people considered faithful obedience to moral law as a way of ensuring better social fortunes and of obtaining favor with God. For them, the behavior of Jesus and the disciples seemed scandalous because it did not take the law with sufficient seriousness.

We must not be too critical of the idea that moral behavior results in good fortune and good favor with God; it is a common and often repeated form of religious behavior. The Pharisees were earnest and well-intentioned people who were following a very plausible way of thinking about what it means to be faithful. There are hordes of people in our time who do the same thing—though perhaps without the seriousness of the Pharisees that sometimes resulted in foolish behavior. Indeed, moral behavior as a test of being faithful came into parts of the early Christian movement itself, and Paul took issue with it emphatically, especially in the letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Paul’s controversy with the so-called Judaizers, who wanted to impose Jewish laws and rites on early Christianity, was about this issue and never an expression of anti-Semitic prejudice.

When moral behavior is made into the precondition of salvation the result is often a brittle and oppressive attitude that results in being morally scrupulous to the point of foolishness. Jesus was at odds with this, and as we shall see in detail in session three, he redefined moral responsibility that radically changed what is required and rendered it impossible for believers ever to claim they have done enough to merit salvation. This did not create a “new law” that simply heightened the moral requirement and called forth a little more effort but redefined moral responsibility so as to make it impossible to be used as a means of meriting salvation. The new way of understanding moral obligation changed the *function* rather than the *content* of the moral responsibility and thus profoundly altered the role that morality plays in the life of faith.



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The Ongoing Problem

In the sessions that follow we will be looking more carefully at the difference this distinction (between *doing good* out of gratitude for God's goodness to us and *doing good* because we think we might earn our salvation) makes for being faithfully moral. It is never easy to keep this distinction front and center when thinking about the nature of moral responsibility. Sometimes it is overlooked and sometimes repudiated, resulting in religion being seen as a source of fixed moral requirements rigidly prescribed and perpetually enduring. Therefore, it is important to make clear that regarding salvation as dependent on moral achievement leads to an unattractive and unfortunate kind of religiosity. Confronting this may involve the use of what theologians call polemics—criticism of false forms of commitment. Polemics are not necessarily bitter condemnations, and they should not be attacks on persons; but they are nevertheless important when confronting the misuses of religious faith.

Such polemics can be found in the New Testament (Matt. 6:1–7 and Matt. 23:1–36). Jesus was often more accepting of outcasts and sinners than approving of those whose rigid obedience to the law was motivated by the desire to be recognized as morally righteous. This did not endear him to the religious establishment, which was put off by his open, sometimes spontaneous, and always grateful response to God's grace and to its consequences for rendering him attentive to human need. Likewise, Paul's criticisms against those for whom the law was the instrument of earning acceptance were hardly gentle.

This same tension was evident at the time of the Reformation, which emphasized the meaning of justification by faith as the key to understanding the nature of moral responsibility and the role of responsiveness as the touchstone of moral fidelity. There were polemics involved: Luther called the book of James, which emphasizes works in contrast to faith as the test of fidelity, "a

book of straw"; Calvin can hardly be accused of polite finesse when he declares that relying on righteousness for salvation is an "abomination."

But considering morality to be the means to earn salvation rather than a response to freely offered grace is not necessarily an intentional and blatant stance. It is, perhaps more often, simply a natural assumption based on a commonly accepted premise that morality is socially useful and that religion is worth supporting because it generates moral behavior. This is one of the reasons people frequently affirm religion as an important aid to human welfare. Religion is endorsed as a socially beneficial way of getting people to be good (and, conversely, as a way of indicating when they are not and scolding them for their shortcomings); and thus both religion and morality are important for their practical value. Instead of urging people to be *good for God's sake* it becomes *for God's sake be good* (or else bad consequences will follow).

Admittedly, moral behavior in many modern societies rarely carries obedience to the point of prudishness. Many individuals are laid-back in their moral behavior—not because they are ungrateful for saving grace—but simply because they do not think righteousness is very important. Such behavior should not be scolded with polemics against legalism. It should be challenged with a new set of understandings—understandings that prompt a new perspective on what it means to be morally committed in faith rather than conventionally decent from habit. Being traditionally moral is one way of conforming to this world—accepting its norms, values, and practices—as an adequate template of fidelity.

To be sure, it can be argued that unless there is a sense of compulsion, then people will not behave morally. Making salvation dependent on obedience clearly provides a sense of compulsion. Yet, this compulsion is a form of external pressure that becomes oppressive to the extent that it is rigorously imposed.

The experience of being justified by faith does not eliminate the need to understand what is morally important. It only changes the reason for wanting to know how to live a life of gratitude to God. It makes morality a manner of joyful response rather than a dreaded necessity. By doing so it makes it possible to be free in the pursuit of faithful living, a freedom that does not deny moral responsibility but transforms it in creative ways. For example, in dealing with whether or not early Christians

were obligated to follow the Jewish Torah in its ceremonial requirements, Paul drew a distinction between what is lawful and what is helpful and indicated that the test of helpfulness takes precedence over the test of lawfulness. This can be applied to thinking about the nature of morality as well. It is a helpful thing to have laws, but it is an even better thing to recognize when compassion and good sense override the requirements of the law—when helpfulness is more important than correctness.

Seeking Moral Maturity

To be moral in this way requires long and sustained schooling in maturity—in the development of dependable character and in the capacity to appreciate what the law is written to encourage and not merely what the law as stated excludes. To understand moral responsibility in this way is to make the moral life an art form rather than a mere subservience to rules. It encourages sensitive responses to circumstances rather than mere conformity to requirements, and it looks to the moral artist for inspiration rather than to an authoritative legalist for guidance.

In setting forth how people should behave, neither Testament draws a distinction between private commitments

and public obligations. That is a distinction that has developed in more recent times and is especially important for a society in which church and state are separate. In such societies, matters of belief and conviction are reserved to individual free choice, while people's actual behavior has social consequences and may therefore be a matter of public concern. Hence, religion has public as well as private consequences, even in a society that separates church and state, let alone in societies in which religious leaders play political roles. This affects the way we have to deal with moral responsibilities, and it calls for serious attention and careful thought.

The lessons in this study pack are designed to explore how this understanding of morality can be cultivated and utilized in a life of free and grateful response to God, not only in how individuals conduct their individual lives but also in how they become mature companions in a community of contagious righteousness.

About the Writer

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