



Making Moral Decisions

SESSION 2

| *Where Do Christians Find Moral Guidance?*

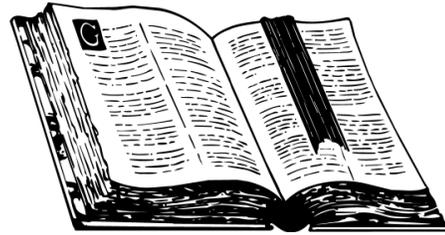
Introduction

Living a life of moral responsibility out of gratefulness to the gift of saving grace may transform the experience of the moral life, but it does not eliminate the desire for, or the need of, moral guidance. Those who are grateful for the experience of salvation will spontaneously and willingly want to know how they can express their gratitude through proper and appropriate behavior. If anything, they become more active in seeking to know what is right and fitting because there is less of a tendency to think of moral requirements as threatening obligations to be met. Outsiders may not be aware of the difference between these two ways of seeking to learn what is right since these different understandings of morality do not necessarily result in different behavior, even though there is a great difference in the *motive* that prompts the effort to be moral. Care of the neighbor, for instance, does not necessarily consist of radically different obligations when it stems from gratitude for the experience of being divinely loved and accepted than it does when it is a norm for earning acceptance. The difference between a morality of works/righteousness and a morality of justification by faith lies not in the behavioral outcome of the guiding norm but rather in the way that norm *functions* in the life of the devout believer.

Four Sources of Moral Guidance

There are four places that over the years have come to be regarded as sources of moral guidance for Christians, each of which is very important and potentially useful.

(1) *Scripture*. The first and most obvious of these is the Bible, which is filled with moral wisdom in both the con-



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tent of many passages and in the manner in which the biblical materials shed light upon the human condition in all its complex and sometimes baffling mysteries. The Bible is not a simplistic guidebook for moral behavior that can be consulted for correctness like a recipe book or a Scout handbook. It is not a listing of legally specified instructions that indicates what is moral in each and every circumstance. Some of its sections define obligations somewhat differently than other sections, either because the ideas came from different times or because they were entered into the collection with the explicit purpose of countering some previous material that had been accorded too much standing. We find phrases like this in the Bible: “In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’” (Jer. 31:29). In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus repeatedly declares “You have heard it said of old . . . but I say unto you.” The biblical view of life is characterized by movement and change rather than by a rigid and inflexible portrayal of what it means to be faithful.

This does not mean that there is a simple and straightforward progression from early and perhaps primitive notions of what is morally right to a more refined understanding that stems from progressive enlightenment. There are changes, and many of them are for the better and indicate a growth in understanding. But one cannot simply use the date a passage was written as a clue to the validity of its moral guidance—asserting that the later the date the more valid the guidance. Any use of the Bible in Christian moral thinking must deal with profound and complex insights that require thoughtful response rather than some imposed scheme of interpretation. When understood most profoundly, the Bible is an invitation to guided reflection about a total narrative. When understood this way the Bible is infallible in the sense of being utterly dependable as a teacher of faith.

This means that reading Scripture is a reliable source of moral guidance when undertaken as an act of faithfulness rather than of thoughtless subservience. It is a strange and curious fact that defining scriptural authority in a way that treats each and every passage as just as authoritative as each and every other passage can be very misleading. While it may not be possible to find a proof text for every kind of moral behavior, it is certainly possible to justify many kinds of behavior that have only minimal moral legitimacy, if indeed they have any legitimacy at all. Using single texts that are presumed to be inerrant as the basis for approving or condemning particular practices is dangerous. Historically, isolated biblical passages have been used to justify inquisitions, slavery, racial segregation, hatred of others, and many other practices that have later been recognized as morally unacceptable, even outrageous. A particularly unreliable use of Scripture is the practice of some people—hopefully only a few—trying to answer a moral question by opening the Bible at random and while looking aside dropping a finger onto some verse and taking that as a guide to what they should do. Such practices lose sight of the story of God’s redeeming and frequently unfathomable gift.

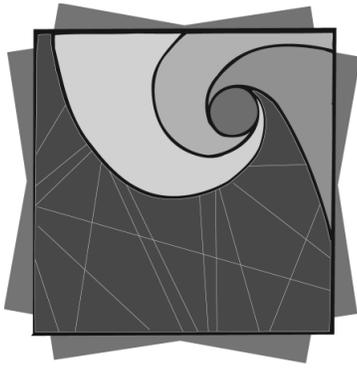
It is even more dangerous to string texts from one context together with texts from other contexts: “Cain slew Abel,” “Go thou and do likewise,” and “What thou doest do quickly,” hardly add up to commendable moral guidance. While it is easy to see the fallacy in that particular mixing of biblical passages, it may be less easy to discern the mistaken use of other compound “proof

text” usages of the Bible. Regardless of how weighty and important the Bible is for moral thinking, no one is infallible in his or her reading or use of Scripture.

(2) *Tradition.* The Church has often regarded the tradition to be an important source of moral guidance. The tradition includes the ongoing reflection of the Christian community and the behavioral practices that it develops. The tradition can be a source of moral wisdom because it develops that wisdom through a group process of mutual interaction in which bizarre and misleading perceptions of the divine will are filtered out, and because contending and sometimes contrasting understandings of God’s intentions (whether suggested by individuals or embraced by splinter groups) are subject to mutual examination by a wider and more representative body of faithful believers. This does not mean that the wider group necessarily gets it right. That claim, which has been frequently advanced, can be wrong just as Scripture can be wrongly selected or misinterpreted.

To assert the moral authority of tradition as though it provides one consistent pattern is a misuse of the idea of tradition. Just as in the case of using scriptural passages as unchallengeable proof texts without taking into account the rich and perceptive understanding of human life bequeathed to us in the Bible, to appeal to the tradition as possessing unique and unchallengeable authority turns it into an instrument of conceptual coercion that results in an oppressive/repressive view of the church’s function. Some denominations insist that Christ alone is the Lord of Conscience. This rules out the possibility that any designated leaders of the church can take to themselves the authority to make followers behave in just one way.

(3) *Reason.* Recognizing that the authority of tradition can be wrongly used, many Christians—especially in modern times—have looked to reason as a source of moral guidance. Anyone who is even remotely informed and spiritually sensitive recognizes the importance of treating statements of moral responsibility with good sense. On what other grounds could we regard the biblical injunction such as Exodus 21:17 to put to death any child that in a fit of rebellious anger has uttered rebellious words against a parent? It is primarily by reason that we come to make distinctions between various moral stances in the Bible—between condoned revenge and the forgiveness of enemies; between cutting off an offending hand or treating this instruction figuratively;



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between ostentatious religiosity and genuine piety; between being foolish for God's sake and being just plain foolish. Likewise, it is by reason that authoritative church teachings are sometimes challenged and other times constructively and wisely used.

Anyone who knows the history of Christian reflection on moral matters knows that it has made extensive use of rational deliberation to develop a body of moral guidance. This body of moral wisdom is often called "natural law" to distinguish it from the more particular and sometimes more demanding moral expectations—such as living in poverty—as counsels of perfection for only some members of the believing community. But such "natural law" can be used to make claims that are not agreed to by all equally reasonable persons. Reason enjoys no immunity from prejudiced influence or individualistic distortions, and giving thought to what is reasonable (and what is not) is just as important a factor in arriving at moral judgments as giving thought to the use of Scripture or to the teaching of a hierarchical authority.

(4) Experience. We learn from the events and encounters through which we pass. We learn there are limits to how fast or how far we can walk or run. We also learn (or at least can learn) that harsh remarks that denigrate others are likely to create hostility and undermine the possibility of mutually beneficial interactions. We also learn that how we treat others—whether human beings, animals, or even the natural world—has serious consequences. We do not always reap what we sow—but it is experience (and not merely belief or tradition or reason) that helps us to realize the consequences of our behavior. We also learn from experience that we live in a world that has lost the grand cohesion that God may have meant for it. One cannot read the so-called ordinances in the Covenant Code (Exod. 21–23) without realizing how much experience informed them.

Experience may shed light on the other sources of guidance and how they may be used. However, it is not an overriding source of moral insight that renders all the other sources subordinate or inconsequential. It is possible to appeal to experience in ways that claim immunity from being challenged. This is particularly evident in cases when individuals claim to have had some private experience they do not question and cannot bring others to replicate or understand. There have been instances when persons have claimed that God has directed them to maim or kill others, or whose experience is used to reject common, accepted religious understanding. Such uses of experience bear an almost insurmountable burden of proof, and while they cannot always be entirely discounted, we have a sound basis for viewing them with suspicion. If only there were simple ways of drawing distinctions between saints and fanatics the discussion of moral issues would be so much simpler!

Moral Discernment Is Difficult

All of the foregoing simply points out that the task of determining what is morally required is complex, thoroughly encumbered with human inadequacy, and not likely to result in absolutely dependable guidance that resolves all issues. Being moral is therefore to be undertaken with fear and trembling rather than with domineering assertiveness. Using the sources of moral guidance involves thoughtfulness and balance. None of them is utterly reliable in and by itself. They do not all fit together into a neat set of rules that are readily understandable and easily followed. Sometimes being true to one kind of guidance does not immediately accord with another source of guidance. Being wise is not a function of thinking only, but a deeper quality of selfhood that interfaces all potential sources of moral guidance into a rich and subtle amalgam of insights and commitments. Being wise knows that human existence is frequently challenging in its complexity and sometimes even frustrating in its ambiguity. That is why we usually think of wisdom as the mark of maturity. Most youths' impatience with ambiguity is understandable and a drawback to their capacity to handle complexity with poise and deal with circumstances with perspective. Their very impatience, however, can be a challenge to those whose experience of ambiguity has prompted them to settle prematurely for a lessened sense of responsibility. Just as the interaction between youthful skill and impatience and an older more perceptive appreciation for

ambiguity makes for communal health, so each source of moral guidance must operate with effectiveness even though that effectiveness cannot be readily translated into simplistic moral guidance derived from that one source alone. There are interactive dynamics among Scripture, the tradition, reason, and experience that effectively inform our moral discernment.

Jesus said that “the sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). That can also be said of moral standards. Moral standards are made for human welfare, not human beings for moral standards. This means that the different sources of moral guidance should be viewed as helpful, as offering insight and support in seeking to know what is right and not as setting up obligations to which unthinking and unwavering obedience is required. While complete consistency is not possible, completely irreconcilable behavior is to be avoided; while absolute certainty is not always possible, doubt is not to be enshrined; while virtue does not save us, salvation generates virtue and does not depend on having already attained it.

Being unable to attain complete and unquestionable moral certainty does not excuse us from seeking to know moral truth as adequately as we can, and nei-

ther does the fact that our achievement of moral understanding is bound to be partial and limited mean that morality is simply accidental or that goodness is entirely relative. The limitations are in *us*, not in the meaningful and purposive structure of the created order. We are furnished with insight and offered the example of great spirits, especially Jesus Christ. They stand before us—yes, even far ahead of us—in their embodiment of moral grandeur. As we seek to understand them we are guided by Scripture through which they are known, the tradition in which they are honored, reason that is guided by faith, and experience that is tested in community settings. For all these sources of guidance we can be profoundly grateful as we seek to be morally faithful by seeking to use them with humility and compassion. That we cannot know the absolute truth does not mean we abandon the search for truth. It only means that we will not settle for partial and premature positions for which we claim too much, and by doing so attempt to set ourselves in the place of God.

About the Writer

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