

RIGHT & WRONG

A Case For Moral Absolutes

CONTENTS

A Moral State Of Mind	2
The Hole In Our Heart	6
Who Says Anybody Is Right Or Wrong?	8
What Are Some Examples Of Moral Absolutes	10
Exceptions To The Rules	15
The Role Of Absolutes In Political Strategy. . . .	20
What Absolutes Can And Cannot Do	30

We live in a time that is marked by “culture wars.” Having lost a dominant moral consensus, we are struggling in our courts, voting booths, and even in our churches to resolve the difficult moral issues that are separating us.

Many have decided that the answer is tolerance, open-mindedness, and mutual respect. While others are convinced that there is a time “to be our brother’s keeper.” They are certain that we cannot afford to merely abandon the moral values of the past and act as if it doesn’t matter what we believe about God, sexual choices, or the life of an unborn child.

Believing that the Bible gives profound insight into this difficult issue, and with the invaluable help of RBC senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt, we offer the following pages as a case for moral absolutes.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 1995,2002 RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Cover Photo: Terry Bidgood

Printed in USA

A MORAL STATE OF MIND

In 1903 Mark Twain wrote *A New Crime*. In it he described a series of murders in which wealthy offenders were found innocent by reason of insanity. Twain's essay concludes, "Insanity certainly is on the increase in the world, and crime is dying out. There are no longer any murders—none worth mentioning, at any rate. Formerly, if you killed a man, it was *possible* that you were insane—but now, if you, having friends and money, kill a man, it is *evidence* that you are [not responsible]."

Twain's tongue-in-cheek comment reflects the current dilemma of our legal system. If moral responsibility is, in part, a state of mind, who can say whether a person who commits a crime of passion should be held

legally responsible? What if the offender was first a victim "maddened" by years of abuse and emotional trauma?

"What we want now is not laws against crime but a law against insanity. There is where the true evil lies."

Mark Twain

Today's legal system, however, is faced with an even more difficult problem. If morality itself is a state of mind, and if there is no longer any social consensus about standards of moral decency, what will keep us from being blown around from year to year by the changing winds of political majority? How can we survive in

a sea of changing values?

Newspaper columnist Charley Reese notes that in Florida a woman can hire an abortionist to terminate the life inside her, but she is charged with “child abuse” if she uses crack while pregnant. A school nurse in the same state cannot dispense an aspirin to a child without written permission from the parents, but a pregnant girl in the same school can get an abortion without notifying her parents.

The inconsistencies are not easily solved in a democracy that has lost a common moral perspective. What looks like common sense to members of the National Organization for Women can seem unthinkable to advocates of the religious right.

But are all rules of life just a matter of perspective? Does a person convicted of child molesting have a right

to work in a day-care center because that is his profession of choice? Are unmarried couples justified in having a sexual relationship because they love each other and practice birth control? Does a man have an ethical right to

***Up can be
down. Inside
can be outside.
Right can be left.
So much depends
on circumstances
and perspective.***

break his marriage vows if he is profoundly unhappy with his wife or if he senses that they are no longer in love with each other?

Higher education doesn't have the answers. Chuck Colson tells of a friend who returned from a 3-week course in business ethics at

Harvard University. The friend claimed that his professor summed up his ethical system with one sentence: “Never do anything you think might end up in the newspapers.”

In his novel *Gideon's Torch*, Colson puts some of the philosophical backdrop for such thinking into a Senate Judiciary Committee confirmation hearing. Senator Byron Langer asks Attorney General appointee Emily Gineen, “Are there no truths by which the state is bound? After all, there are physical laws governing the universe. Are there not also moral laws binding us? Are there not binding truths that limit the state?” Professor Gineen replies, “Truth? I believe truth, sir, is, as the great Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, the majority will. In fact, Judge Robert Bork, whom you so enthusiastically supported, once said, “Truth is what the

majority thinks it is at any given moment, precisely because the majority is permitted to govern and redefine its values constantly” (p.75).

***For many in
our day, the only
absolute is that
there are no
absolutes at all.***

Such dialog about the nature of truth is more than a matter of historical fiction. When Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing Of The American Mind* in 1987, he described a similar perspective which he said is characteristic of young Americans. According to Bloom, “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative” (p.25).

Bloom went on to explain that as far as today's student is concerned, "The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it." They believe that for Roman Catholics, Baptists, Hindus, and Atheists to live together in a free society, they must commit themselves to the overriding virtues of tolerance and open-mindedness. Bloom observes that in such a world, "The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all" (p.26).

This is the mindset of the

world in which we live. The values and logic of a relativistic age are so woven into the fabric of our culture that it is easy to forget the story of history. We might not want to believe that

***Like the physical
law of gravity,
moral absolutes
can seem at times
as if they do more
harm than good.***

Moses got his moral principles from God. But it is hard to deny that when we break the Ten Commandments, they end up breaking us. Rejection of sexual absolutes alone has resulted in sexual addiction, incurable diseases, unwanted pregnancies, betrayal of trusts, broken marriages, confusion of gender, loss of health, and death.

THE HOLE IN OUR HEART

Relativism is not a new idea. In the 5th century BC, the Greek philosopher Protagoras taught that human judgment is subjective and that one's perception is valid only for oneself. A still earlier example of practical relativism is found in the Bible. The book of Judges describes one of the darkest periods of human history as a time when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25).

A few generations later, Solomon, the third king of Israel, struggled with profound questions of significance after rejecting the moral principles of his soldier-king father David. Known as one of the most intelligent men who ever lived, Solomon tried for a while to sacrifice principle

for personal and political peace. From the record of 1 Kings, it appears that he forged an accord with neighboring nations by entering into a series of political marriages with the daughters of pagan kings (1 Ki. 11:1-8).

***"Everyone did
what was right
in his own eyes."
Judges 17:6***

As his personal essay called Ecclesiastes shows, Solomon also looked for personal satisfaction in a wide range of life experiences. He tried to find significance in education, music, alcohol, relationships, and better homes and gardens. Each time he came up empty and troubled by the changing circumstances of life and by an eternal hole in his heart

that no pleasure could fill.

Yet as he thoughtfully evaluated his confusion, Solomon found that he could not honestly deny that even the seasons of life seemed to have lasting purpose and beauty. In the middle of his search for meaning, he wrote:

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to

tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts (Eccl. 3:1-11).

In his thoughtful moments, the king found a hole in his heart.

Challenged by the beauty of life's seasons, and unable to satisfy his own appetites with the pleasures of time, Solomon remembered the One in whose likeness he was created (Eccl. 12:13-14).

WHO SAYS ANYBODY IS RIGHT OR WRONG?

More and more Americans seem to be abandoning the kind of conclusions Solomon came to. Barna Research Group reports that in 1991, 67 percent of all adults agreed that there is no such thing as absolute truth. In 1994, the figure climbed to 72 percent. In the same year, 62 percent of those who called themselves born-again Christians said they doubted the existence of absolute truth.

These figures include religious leaders as well as lay people. In many denominations it is common to hear spiritual leaders speak of their own faith as tradition rather than belief. Pastors can be as open-minded as the rest of the culture. In more than a

few cases, they are open to anything except historic Christian doctrine. Even though bearing the symbols of Christian ordination, many are more committed to the doctrines of relativism than to the doctrines of biblical faith.

*Many believe
they are right,
but not that
others are wrong.*

For an increasing number both inside and outside the church, virtue lies not in being faithful to biblically defined truth but rather in expressing attitudes of tolerance and mutual respect. While there is nothing wrong with tolerance and mutual respect, there is something wrong with a mind that is so open it can't tell truth from error.

Against this trend stands a whole body of Old and New Testament witnesses. The uniqueness of biblical faith is that it is rooted in geographical and historical events. While we stand a long way from the miraculous exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, and from the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead, our faith rests on the evidence of those witnesses who collectively left their mark on history.

Witnesses to the scarred hands and feet of Jesus have much to say to people living today in a pluralistic world. These disciples were willing to die for more than a set of religious ideas. They died for their claim that the Jesus who was crucified under authority of Pontius Pilate broke out of a sealed, well-guarded tomb 3 days later.

A risen Christ is the answer for the fears of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural

world. Without ever compromising His claim of truth, Jesus taught us to love not only our neighbor but our enemy as well. Without ever compromising His own character or any absolute value of His Father, Jesus earned a reputation of being the “friend of sinners.”

***Because Jesus rose
from the dead,
we can believe in
absolute principles
of morality rooted
in the character
of God.***

If Christ revealed God, then He revealed at the same time the Source of all absolute standards of moral decision. More important for us, He showed that the ultimate absolute is a God who shows us what is right only because He loves us.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF MORAL ABSOLUTES?

The heart of Christ's teaching is found in the Old Testament. The moral standards He found there became the measure of His own life. Most of these Scriptures, however, are not expressed in the form of timeless

Jesus showed the relationship between moral absolutes and a loving attitude.

moral law. Much in the 39 books of the Old Covenant is narrative. Some of it is poetry, and some is expressed as general principles of wisdom. Behind all of these Scriptures, however,

is a God who by His own nature is the basis for absolute moral law.

Let's take a look at a few of the laws that meet the requirement of a moral absolute.

Absolutes To Protect Faith And Worship. When a legal expert asked Jesus to identify the most important of all laws, Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Mt. 22:37-40).

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus was able to keep absolutes in perspective and balance. While they might have expected Him to begin by quoting the first of

the Ten Commandments, they didn't expect Him to answer them in such a way as to expose their own hypocrisy.

Jesus could have answered the Pharisees by quoting the God of Moses, who said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:2-3). Instead, Jesus saw their need. Because of their love for religious law, they thought they loved God. But they didn't love Him as much as they thought. Otherwise, they would have loved the people He loved.

In defining this first moral absolute, Jesus showed all of us our deep need for forgiveness.

Absolutes To Protect The Family.

Jesus also kept the spirit of the timeless laws that were meant to protect the family.

By the respect He showed for Mary and Joseph, even when He knew more than they did, He taught us to "honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12).

Honoring our parents is our first opportunity to see if we have anything to learn from history.

Today's young people live in a culture that encourages them to question authority rather than to honor it. Some of this suspicion is necessary because of the toxic nature of many parents, governments, and religious institutions. The Bible itself warns that it is a mistake to follow the example of godless fathers uncritically (2 Ki. 21:20).

The Bible, however, also treats parental honor as a timeless cross-cultural principle. If we do not learn to respect the authority of our parents (even before learning to evaluate it critically), we are not likely to learn the difference between good and bad authority in other areas of life. If we grow up despising our parents, we are likely to rebel not only against *them* but against all authority—including God Himself.

Another provision to protect family relationships is found in the seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” While many think modern birth control offsets the need for such a rule, the timeless wisdom of this law remains intact. What loving husband or wife would not feel betrayed just because his or her mate practiced birth control with another partner? What married

person would not prefer to have a husband or wife who had never had another sexual partner?

Certainly love can overcome a less-than-ideal past. But let’s not close our eyes to the profound emotional and spiritual nature of sexual intimacy.

***Cultural relativism
has broken down
the protective
fences of sexual
restraint.***

The Bible still says what it always has about the relationship that God uses to multiply His likeness in the world. The Scriptures treat sexual passion as wonderful in marriage (Heb. 13:4) but as a fire in the lap of those who share no lifetime commitment. It is because God loves us that He considers sex between

people not married to each other as fornication and adultery (Heb. 13:4; 1 Cor. 6:18). It is because He cares about us that He warns about same-sex relationships, which are viewed by both Old and New Testaments as unnatural (Rom. 1:26) and therefore a self-harming violation of the men and women we were made to be (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Absolutes To Protect The Sacredness Of Life.

With a concern dating back to the homicide of Cain, Moses said, “You shall not murder.” The command means that for all people in all times, it is wrong to shed innocent blood. It is a principle rooted not only in the preservation of human life but in the sacred nature of the likeness of God.

Because of the moral and political interests of our day, some will wonder

about abortion. Why didn't God give a commandment specifically forbidding abortion? In “The Abortion Epidemic: America's Silent Holocaust,” J. Carl Laney quotes Meredith Kline: “The most significant thing about abortion legislation in biblical law is that there is none. It was so unthinkable that an Israelite woman should desire an abortion that there was no need to mention this offense in the criminal code” (*Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society*, Sept. 1977, p.193, quoted in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct.–Dec. 1982, p.346).

After listing several facts about the high value Jewish families placed on children and childbirth, Laney adds, “Interestingly, ancient Assyrian laws attest to the abhorrence of abortion even by the heathen nations that surrounded Israel. According to those laws, a woman guilty of an abortion was

condemned to be impaled on stakes. Even if she lost her life in the abortion procedure, she was still to be impaled as an expression of the community's repudiation of such an abominable practice."

Absolutes To Protect Honest Relationships. God consistently forbids in Scripture all forms of stealing, dishonesty, and deceit. The eighth of the Ten Commandments is, "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15). The ninth commandment reads, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (v.16). The tenth law concludes, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's" (v.17). These

commandments, together with Paul's command, "Do not lie to one another" (Col. 3:9), reflect God's timeless standard for honest, heartfelt relationships.

While most people see the relative value of honesty, many don't view it as an absolute principle of ethics rooted in the very nature of God. Lying to protect their own interests has become for many a necessary evil. Many professional men and women assume that it is impossible to live with integrity in their occupation.

Jesus, however, taught His followers to be distinguished by their honesty (Mt. 5:37). According to the God of the Bible, truth is not relative. Honesty is foundational to morality. It is a most basic principle of His trustworthiness and character.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES

To this point, we have stated or implied that nine of Moses' Ten Commandments express timeless moral absolutes. But we omitted the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8).

We also quoted the command, "You shall not murder" (v.13). Yet the vast majority of Christians sanction killing in self-defense, destroying lives in a just war, and executing certain criminals.

We reason that Christians should obey those in authority, yet we honor the memory of Corrie Ten Boom and other believers who risked their lives by hiding Jews from the Nazi government.

We declare that God intends marriage to be a lifelong union, yet quote

the words of Jesus, "except for sexual immorality," to justify a divorce.

In all these instances we state an absolute, and then we proceed to modify it. We do so because the Bible itself shows us that among the laws of Scripture there are some that do not qualify as absolute standards for all people, at all times, and in all circumstances.

The Nonabsolute Law Of The Sabbath.

At Mount Sinai, God commanded the Israelites to keep the seventh day of the week as a day of complete rest—even slaves and domesticated animals were to rest from all labor (Ex. 20:8-11). God had introduced the idea of a Sabbath to the Israelites a few weeks earlier when He told them to gather a double portion of manna on the sixth day and then keep it from spoiling (16:23-26). But both the Bible and

archaeological evidence combine to show us that no precise Sabbath law existed from Adam until Moses. Moreover, God declared that the Sabbath “is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever” (31:17). Paul made it clear that it is not a rule for the church age when he wrote, “Let no one judge you . . . regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come” (Col. 2:16-17).

It should also be noted that even when the Sabbath law was in effect, it did not forbid a person from pulling an animal out of a pit. Jesus pointed this out when He was criticized for healing on the Sabbath. Even the strictest of the scribes and Pharisees had to admit that it was lawful to do good on this day of rest. (See Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:6-11; 13:14-15; 14:1-6.)

God, who established the

Sabbath commandment, provided modification for its observance, declared it to be a sign between Him and Israel, and made it clear that believers in the church age are not under an obligation to keep it.

The Nonabsolute Law Against Killing.

God declared, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). Yet He led the armies of Israel into war and commanded that people guilty of certain crimes were to be killed by stoning (Dt. 13:10; 17:5; 21:21; 22:21,24).

The key to understanding the teaching of the Bible on this subject is to distinguish between the absolute law against murder and the non-absolute principle of killing. Murder is unjustified homicide, either as a premeditated, willful act of revenge or in the commission of a serious crime such as robbery, arson, or kidnapping. The

police officer who kills in defense of self or others, the soldier who kills in a war, or the state-appointed executioner who carries out the death penalty do not commit murder. Such killings are carried out with reluctance, and their aim is to benefit the majority. Without them, anarchy would prevail.

*Some laws
which at first seem
absolute are later
modified by
circumstance.*

The Nonabsolute Law Of Submission.

The Bible commands obedience to civil and religious authority—citizens to government, wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters. Yet Daniel’s friends refused orders to bow to the

image of Nebuchadnezzar and were miraculously delivered (Dan. 3). The apostles preached the gospel even though they were forbidden to do so by the authorities. They responded, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

The Bible doesn’t give women and children specific instructions about resisting abusive husbands or parents. However, Moses tolerated a divorce law for a husband who saw in his wife what he perceived as a serious flaw (Dt. 24:1-4). This undoubtedly protected such a woman from a lifetime of abuse and opened the door for a new marriage. Jesus said that “sexual immorality” is grounds for a divorce that God recognizes as valid (Mt. 19:9). And Paul declared that the willful desertion of a believer by an unbeliever is cause for a divorce (1 Cor. 7:15). It also appears that

Paul allowed for a woman to divorce an abusive husband even if he hadn't been sexually unfaithful. After he declared, "A wife is not to depart from [divorce] her husband," he added, "but even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband" (1 Cor. 7:10-11). The ideal is continuance of the marriage, but the safety valve for a dangerous situation is a divorce without the right of remarriage as long as the offending partner remains unmarried (see *Divorce & Remarriage: What Does The Bible Say?* Q0806).

God doesn't give children instruction about their responsibility to abusive parents. But it seems that the principles that apply to a Christian's relationship to an abusive or unjust government and the Christian spouse's relationship to an abusive and unjust mate would

apply to them as well. Paul commanded, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1). The phrase "in the Lord" seems to provide a condition that instructs

***Only when we see
how the whole
counsel of Scripture
applies a law can
we determine
whether it is meant
to be circumstantial
or absolute.***

children to obey parental authority in the spirit in which God intended them to obey. For example, should a young person raised in a Muslim family reject personal faith in Christ so that he will remain obedient to his parents?

In summary, it seems apparent that it is wrong to obey authorities when they demand that we disobey God Himself. But we must do so respectfully and submit humbly to the penalty prescribed. Moreover, as the imagebearers of God, we possess a dignity that is violated when we are abused. We therefore have a right, even an obligation, to resist abuse, but we must do so in the power of the Spirit. If it is impossible to escape persecution and wrong, we are to take it patiently, remembering the example of our Savior (1 Pet. 2:18-25).

The Nonabsolute Law Of Deception.

While God forbids lying and all forms of malicious slander, He has given us examples of instances in which it is permissible to give shrewd and misleading answers to evil people.

When Moses was sent to deliver Israel from Egypt, God told Moses to ask the Pharaoh for permission to take Israel on a 3-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices.

Similarly, when Samuel was fearful that King Saul would kill him if he learned that he had gone to the home of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as Israel's next king, God told him to take with him a heifer and say only that he had come into Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice. This was one of the reasons, but it was not the whole truth (1 Sam. 16:1-3). We may therefore use partial truth when the full truth would bring harm to innocent people.

There is a difference between denying the truth, which God would never do, and telling part of the truth so as to be misleading to evil people.

THE ROLE OF ABSOLUTES IN POLITICAL STRATEGY

The first Christians didn't have to face the problem that those who live as free citizens in a democratic society have to face. They had no voice in choosing political leaders or making laws. They couldn't vote or hold office. Their sole mission was to call people of all social ranks into another kingdom centered in the spiritual and moral lordship of Christ.

Christian citizens in a democracy or republic, however, have the opportunity to participate in the government whose leaders they help to elect. This privilege raises questions. Should followers of Christ use the political process in an effort to make Judeo-Christian values the law of the land?

Some go so far as to say the Christian mission is to reclaim government and culture for Christ, and to put civil laws in place that are consistent with the Mosaic Code. For some, that means enacting laws that would require the death penalty for heterosexual or homosexual sin, and legalize only one religion. While only a small number go that far, many talk the language of political strategy that converts faith to votes, votes to representatives, and representatives to political and judicial reform.

Other Christians discourage any political involvement. They contend that we should limit ourselves to evangelizing the lost and teaching Christians how to live God-honoring lives. They argue that no matter what we do, we are going to have poor people, social injustice, crime, revolution, and wars until

Christ returns. In fact, they see the present permissiveness and cruelty in our society as the fulfillment of Scriptures like 2 Timothy 3 and believe these prevailing evils are indicators that the return of Christ is near. They believe

***People of similar
faith are divided
over differences
of strategy.***

our role is not to change the world for Christ but rather to call people out of the world into a new kingdom. In this view, solutions will be found not by legislation consistent with biblical absolutes but rather in the lives of those who are driven by their own moral failure to the rescuing life of Christ.

The issue is one of strategy. All must acknowledge that the God

of the Bible is concerned about social injustice, ethnic conflict, and domestic violence.

The words of Proverbs 14:34 are always true: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." So are the words of Isaiah: "The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders of His people and His princes: 'For you have eaten up the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people and grinding the faces of the poor?' says the Lord God of hosts" (Isa. 3:14-15).

In Romans 1:18-32 the apostle Paul reasoned that God's anger is aroused against the rebellion of those who reject Him, refuse to honor Him, and go down the path of oppression and violence. The God of the Bible cares about the poor and

oppressed. He is distressed by human violence.

The question, however, is whether God wants the citizens of a democratic nation to convert their faith to votes and legislation. Does He want us to organize for political and judicial reform? Or does God call His people to be Jonahs in the streets of Nineveh?

In a pluralistic society, what does it mean to do to others as we would have them do to us?

Certainly Christians need to vote their morality in the voting booth. But what does it mean to apply the law of Christ in a pluralistic society? At the very minimum, it means doing to others as we would want them to do to us. What does

that mean? How would we want a Muslim to vote about matters that might infringe on our Christian convictions? How would we want a New Ager to vote in issues of policy that might jeopardize the freedom of conservative churches?

If by casting enough votes we could convert Muslims and New Agers to Christ, we would have our answer. But if we believe in the absolute rule of doing to others as we would have them do to us, then we must think carefully, shrewdly, and lovingly about what that means.

In our present age, no nation has a special relationship with God as Israel did from the time of Moses until Christ. And no fire-from-the-sky Elijahs have appeared on the scene. But God's people are given the privilege of representing Him. They are called to have a servant's

heart and a prophetic voice in a world that needs to be confronted with its own tendency to self-destruct.

To this day, Germany's pre-World War II Christian leaders are rightly criticized because few were willing to speak out against the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis.

What is the Hitler-like destroyer of our day? Is it a national policy of abortion? Or is the destroyer a spirit of relativism that is leading millions to believe that it is safe for everyone to do what is right in his own eyes? Without absolute moral convictions, many today are falling into the fires of heterosexual and homosexual sin. By assuming that what counts is our own satisfaction and avoidance of pain, we have become addicted to food, alcohol, work, television, and sexualized relationships. By assuming that one religion is as good as another,

hundreds of thousands of people have lost the fear of God and have discounted the reality of waking up one day in the kind of eternal state Jesus talked about.

The church must carefully weigh the difference between a political and prophetic strategy.

The Role Of The Church. Each church is a family of believers united for worship, instruction in the Word of God, the administration of the ordinances, the exercise of correction, the mutual building up of the saints, and evangelism. The Bible does not directly indicate that a church or group of churches should attempt to change the laws of the land. In fact, history has shown that churches have

deteriorated whenever they have united with government or attempted to share the power of the state.

Pastors and church leaders cannot afford to shy away from lovingly declaring the truth of God's Word as it relates to social issues. The Bible, as noted earlier, has much to say about social justice, the sacredness of marriage, the qualities of a good home, and the standards of sexual morality. These truths need to be taught.

But we must think carefully about what happens when the foyer of the church is used to organize a political response to moral issues. The church needs to be a place where those who take the name of Christ thoughtfully apply the values of God to their own lives. It is the place where we need to equip ourselves to reach out with a loving

prophetic voice to our society.

There are additional reasons for not entangling our group reputation in political alliances. Syndicated columnist Colman McCarthy writes,

Our world needs to sense that we are making an issue of morality for their sakes rather than merely to protect our own interests.

“The Republican right is being bankrolled by money that is decidedly anti-family. Alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and gun interests are among the major donors to the Republican National Committee” (*Grand Rapids Press*, 5/26/95). Churches that identify with political parties or groups will

inevitably compromise their testimony, harm their witness for Christ, and stray from their primary tasks. The role of the church is spiritual, and her method is always to be that of moral persuasion, not political power.

The Role Of The Christian Citizen.

Individual Christians can by their own example promote morality and justice in their culture. But we should demonstrate Christlike values in such a way that our words and actions promote our overriding interest in every person's eternal destiny. In the process of seeking the highest good of others, we need to avoid ridicule and disrespect and the kind of attack mentality that leads others to conclude that we are not *for* them but *against* them.

We must make it our goal to be winsome, honest, and

civil as we express our spiritual and moral concern for others' welfare. Our conduct should be such that even if others tell us to mind our own business, they will have to acknowledge our sincerity. Even when we are unjustly attacked or intentionally misrepresented, our response must reflect the spirit of Christ. The words of the apostle Peter are appropriate when he writes:

Who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as

evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (1 Pet. 3:13-17).

If we can maintain such an attitude, we will be salt and light in our world. When we hold ourselves accountable to our own principles, we will be good for society. John Adams, a founding father of the United States, said, “We have no government capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the governing of any other.”

Today, secularists and some religious leaders are arguing for the legalization of same-sex marriage, prostitution, and abortion on demand. Christians must

by their own example and loving actions warn that such practices will only deepen the pain and confusion of society.

All too often, however, the church has lost its power of persuasion

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned?”

Jesus (Mt. 5:13)

because its own leaders talk the talk without walking the walk. That was the problem of the Pharisees. They saw themselves as defenders of moral purity because they could articulate the laws of Moses. But because they themselves did not live by such standards, they ended up in a hypocritical posture that made them the enemies of Christ.

But let us not, for fear of being pharisaical, throw in the towel. The need of the hour is not for capitulation to the darkness. The need is for the kind of repentance and love that will rekindle the flame of truth in us.

Society needs to be reminded that all is not relative. That philosophy has prevailed in the United States for almost two decades. The ideal the secularists are seeking is a culture in which “women’s rights to control their own bodies is recognized and respected, the sexual practices of adults, whether of the same or of different sexes, are of no concern to anyone except themselves, governmental institutions avoid manifestation of religiosity, public schools are free of sectarianism” (Leo Pfeffer, quoted by E. Michael Jones in *Culture Wars*, May 1995, p.7). These freedoms have produced millions of

abortions, an AIDS epidemic, and a wave of out-of-wedlock births, which among one minority group today is 7 out of every 10 births.

***As broken people
count the cost of
their choices, they
need to be told
that the price for
their sin has been
paid in full.***

The solution to society’s problems is not going to be reached through legislation that outlaws all abortions, imprisons active homosexuals, or cuts off aid to single mothers. But those people do need to know that Someone hates pride and stubborn moral independence. They need to know that Someone loves them enough to care that they are being broken by the

moral standards they have ignored. They need to see in us a passionate hatred of evil that is blended with kindness. They need to see in us gracious tact and sound logic that patiently draws them to the One who has already forgiven our sins and filled us with love.

They need to know that the greatest danger of all is not breaking a moral absolute but refusing to accept the free salvation and protective lordship of Christ.

But are we self-righteous in saying that we have what the rest of the world needs? Are we morally arrogant to say that we are right and others are wrong? Not if our sense of rightness is based on the undeserved forgiveness that we have received at the nail-scarred feet of Christ.

Furthermore, it is important to make clear that we have an awareness of sin that goes much

broader and deeper than the current political debate. It's important to realize that while much energy is being waged to fight the social problems of abortion and same-sex relationships, there are worse sins to be considered.

It is not self-righteous to say that others are wrong, unless in the process we believe that we have become right by our own efforts.

Here is where our own religious world needs to hear the prophetic voice of Ezekiel, who made it clear that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are not far from any of our hearts. While we might think that God

judged the people of Sodom for their homosexuality, that is only part of the picture. Ezekiel showed that sin is an equal-opportunity slave-maker when he wrote:

Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit (Ezek. 16:49-50).

From the Word of God and the lessons of history, we can let our contemporaries know that behind their sexual perversions and domestic violence there is an attitude that makes them the center of their universe. Behind the sins that destroy empires is the self-absorbed pattern of individuals

concerned only about their own needs and doing what is right in their own eyes.

When the people of God lose their honor and their love for those outside of their

***When selfishness
fills the church,
it spills out
into society.***

own family circle, everyone pays. When those who know the message of grace in Christ stop caring about the immediate pains and eternal souls of others, and when they begin instead to circle the wagons in a defensive moralistic posture, society is turned over to the inevitable failure of its own laws.

Making more laws will not change a society that no longer believes in moral law. But then neither will it be saved by the absolutes of the Bible.

WHAT ABSOLUTES CAN AND CANNOT DO

We have seen what happens when a society loses its moral consensus, and therefore its basis for law and order. But the relativism that is robbing us of social restraints poses a greater danger.

In his book *Right From Wrong*, Josh McDowell makes a case for the dominance and damages of relativism in our culture. He also indicts us for our failure to show young people the more profound personal issues that are at stake.

McDowell shows that if we merely teach moral “shoulds” and “should nots,” we are apt to cultivate moral legalism in ourselves and our young people. A better approach, he reasons, is to carefully work through

the relationship between:

1. Precepts (“shoulds and should nots”),
2. Principles, and the
3. Personal unchanging character of God.

Josh argues that only when we understand whether an “ought” is rooted in a principle, and only when we see the relationship between a timeless principle and the character of God, will we be able to understand the real difference between right and wrong.

McDowell makes an important point. Unless we are careful, we are apt to turn moral absolutes into something they were never meant to be. We cannot afford to see moral absolutes as the opinions of a parent generation. If that’s the impression we leave, then our young people are bound to miss the real moral issues before them.

According to the New

Testament, it is critical that we understand what even the most important moral laws can and cannot do. It is important, according to the apostle Paul, that we understand that while the law can show us what is right, that same law can never make us good.

A knowledge of the law may make us feel morally superior. To believe in the difference between right and wrong can feel morally uplifting. But as Paul so forcefully reasons, there is a great difference between knowing the law and keeping it.

There is a great difference between knowing the law and keeping it.

Paul said that the law was meant to give us a measure by which we could

see the extent of the gulf between us and the God who made us for Himself. The law shows the kind of character that God can give to those who actively choose to let His Son and His Spirit manage and energize their choices.

The law, however, was never meant to be something that we have to keep in order to earn and deserve the forgiveness and eternal life of God. That is why Paul could write:

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Gal. 2:16).

When rightly understood, the law shows us our need of the forgiveness of God and for

the Spirit of God who alone can give us a new heart. That's why Paul wrote to the Ephesians, who had already believed in the One who died for their sins:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

But what happens when we realize that our failure to keep the law makes us dependent on the gift of God? Once we are in Christ, can our efforts to live according to our moral absolutes make us good Christians? Read what Paul wrote to a group of church people who made that mistake:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as

crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-3).

All that the absolute laws of God could ever do was show us our need for the undeserved help of the Spirit of God. All it could ever do is show us how mistaken we are to attempt to live by what is right in our own eyes. All the law could do is show us that what counts in salvation, and in the life that follows, is a dependence on God to develop in us a heart of truth and love.

The good news is that Christ died and rose again to offer us a life that no law could ever give!

Get your free Bible Resources catalog!



Discovery Series booklets can be valuable guides to help you learn what the Bible says about a broad range of topics. Each 32-page booklet can be used in your personal Bible study or in a small-group setting.

Your free Bible Resources catalog includes a brief

description of each Discovery Series booklet. To get your copy, write to us at the address below and ask for a catalog. Or follow the link below to request your copy today.

www.discoveryseries.org/catalog

USA: PO Box 2222, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-2222
Canada: Box 1622, Windsor, ON N9A 6Z7