



Right and wrong

There was a time when everyone knew what was right and wrong. Society had standards that were recognized even if they were not always adhered to. Today all that has changed. Morality has died, and 'anything goes' has become the philosophy by which society lives or, perhaps more accurately, the philosophy by which it is dying. There's now no such thing as right and wrong, because there are no recognized absolute standards. So things that were condemned thirty years ago, like homosexuality, adultery, public nudity, and foul language, are now acceptable. And if you want to return to the old standards you're regarded with total intolerance as puritanical.

Why has the change come about? Has a more loving and gentle spirit developed in our society? No. The change is the result of a rejection of God and the Christian faith. It's

PUTTING SIN TO DEATH

not an expression of love, but an intolerance of anything that is biblical. For years we thought we could have the morality of the New Testament without the Christ of the New Testament. People would say that all we needed was the Sermon on the Mount and that the rest of Christian teaching was divisive. Now even the Sermon on the Mount is too narrow and restrictive.

All this can be very confusing for a young believer. How can we live a Christian life in this moral climate? We need to start by accepting that God's standards are absolute; for example, that what God declared in the Ten Commandments thousands of years ago still applies today. It's still wrong to commit adultery or to covet. Moral truth is not dictated by the passing whims of society but is the unchanging will of God. The world may never accept this, but the Christian must. Our standards must be the ones set out by God in the Bible, otherwise the Christian faith has no authoritative voice with which to speak to the world. A Christian faith which does not practise Christianity is hypocrisy.

Conscience

Conscience is the God-given ability of all men and women to distinguish between right and wrong. The apostle Paul argues that this is as true of the unbeliever as it is of the believer

(Romans 2:15). Men and women are not animals and they have more than instinct with which to react to situations. We have a mind and will, and conscience uses these. Conscience is to the mind what pain is to the body. It warns that something is wrong and needs dealing with. But the conscience is not infallible and needs a standard to refer to. 'Its role,' says John MacArthur, 'is not to teach us moral and ethical ideals, but to hold us accountable to the highest standards of right and wrong we know.' The great problem of our society at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that, having rejected God and the authority of the Bible, our standard of right and wrong is not very high. This isn't true just of criminals, but of society as a whole—that's why we tolerate moral filth in our homes via TV that would have been utterly unacceptable thirty years ago. This inevitably deadens the conscience.

The conscience is meant to make us aware of personal guilt, but today we are urged to avoid feeling guilty. This often leads to society giving more sympathy to criminals than to their victims. After mugging and brutally beating an old man on the New York subway, Bernard McCummings was shot as he ran away from his crime. He was permanently paralysed, and sued the New York Transit Authority for damages. He won \$4.8 million. The man he mugged, a cancer patient, had to

keep paying medical bills. McCummings, the mugger, whom the courts regarded as the greater victim, became a multi-millionaire.

By its abysmally low standard of right and wrong, and its refusal to accept guilt, society has effectively silenced the conscience. When you become a Christian, you are saved out of that kind of background and, in your new life, you have to resist and avoid its influence.

A new standard

The Christian's standard has to be the unchanging Word of God. It's by submitting to the authority of Scripture in our everyday lives that sanctification is worked in us. The purpose of sanctification is to make us like Christ. This is God's desire for us, and it ought to be the chief ambition of every believer. It's not easy—but it will be totally impossible if our standards are not the same as Christ's. So we need to learn to think biblically; to so absorb the teaching of the Bible that it permeates our thinking and governs our desires. In this way the conscience has the highest possible standard to relate to.

When the Bible becomes our standard we will start to take God seriously; only then will it be possible to take sin seriously. Then we will be able to recognize our weaknesses and deal with them. We'll no longer be able to tolerate what God hates. The greatest danger in the Christian life comes when we think of our sins as being inevitable. If we believe we can't do anything about our sin, it means our doctrine of sanctification is hopelessly wrong: we are

told very clearly in Romans 6 that we are dead to sin, and that we must not let it reign in our bodies. Sin is no longer our master; therefore, it can't make us do anything. Sin can only operate in the Christian with his or her co-operation.

Withdrawing that co-operation is what the Bible calls 'putting sin to death'. This is an obligation for all believers (Romans 8:12-13). Putting sin to death means applying our new biblical standards to our lives. We don't do this merely by will power, but by the Holy Spirit's power. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to mortify, or put to death, sin. John MacArthur says, 'The instrument of mortification is the Holy Spirit, and his power is the energy that works in us to carry out the process. All the means of mortification are simply commands of Scripture that we are called to obey.' MacArthur then goes on to list some of them:

Abstain from fleshly lusts (sinful desires)—1 Peter 2:11

Make no provision for the sinful nature—Romans 13:14

Fix your heart on Christ—1 John 3:2-3

Meditate on God's Word—Psalm 119:11; Joshua 1:8

Pray without ceasing—Luke 22:40; Matthew 26:41

Watch and pray—Psalm 19:12-14

Exercise self-control—1 Corinthians 9:25-27

Be filled with the Holy Spirit—Ephesians 5:18

Be filled with the Holy Spirit



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