

How can you be sure your ideas of right and wrong apply to everybody?

PHBF 07.14.13

TEXT: various

Scr. Reading: Rom 2:6-16

Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask

I want to begin this morning with a “Truth Test.” Ten statements. You tell me if these matters are matters of truth or preference. Objective or subjective? Are these issues fact or opinion?

- My coat is blue. (Obj/Fact)
- Blue is the most beautiful color. (Subj/Opinion)
- Abraham Lincoln was the 16th US President. (Obj/Fact)
- Abraham Lincoln was the best US President. (Subj/Opinion)
- Lars can do 100 pushups in a row. (Obj/Fact)
- Christians should all be in the Republican Party. (Subj/Opinion)
- Jesus Christ is the only way to God, even for people who have never heard His name. (Obj/Fact)
- The Holocaust was morally wrong. (Obj/Fact)
- Sex outside of marriage is morally wrong. (Obj/Fact)
- Exceeding the posted speed limit on the way to work is morally wrong. (no comment)

This morning’s question gets into this area of facts vs. opinions, objective truth vs. subjective preference. Standards of right and wrong—are they universal and timeless, or are they personal and private? Is there such a thing as absolute morality, or is it all relative?

You might have heard the term “moral relativism”—the belief that there is no absolute truth, no universal standard for right and wrong. And this philosophy is everywhere in our culture. I’m sure you’ve heard statements like these: “Who am I to judge? Each person should be free to decide for himself. I wouldn’t do that, but I’m OK with it if it works for her. We shouldn’t impose our views on other people. Whatever makes you happy.” In our culture, this is the air we breathe. Sentiments like this are everywhere—in the music, on the sitcoms, and rife in political discussions. I heard about a situation a few years ago where a parent gave her toddler marijuana, recorded the kid using it, and posted the video online. The Christian host of the radio show I was listening to opened his remarks with: “Well, I know you’re not supposed to judge, but to me that’s just too much.”

Before we proceed to try to answer this question, I think we need to get perfectly clear in our minds how this way of thinking is a massive problem for the spread of the gospel, for Christian discipleship, and for human culture at large:

1. Relativism erases sin; and if we lose our sense of sin, we lose the gospel. The “good news” gets reduced to just “news.” Once sin disappears, grace disappears right along with it.

ILLUS: throwing myself into a river to “show my love” vs. throwing myself into a river to save your life. My act is incomprehensible, the point is lost, unless you are in danger.

2. Relativism erodes moral conviction.

It’s hard to stand for what you believe if you’re not even sure it’s true or real. We’ll never talk with anyone about Christ if we’re not convinced Christianity is true universally and absolutely.

3. Relativism destroys human society.

No society can exist under this ethic. Without absolute moral standards, there can be no moral criticism (like saying that oppressing women is wrong), no moral progress (like saying the Civil Rights movement and abolition were good things), and no heroes or villains (like saying Mother Theresa was good and Hitler was bad). Obviously, this won’t work. Stable societies require some measure of shared values. If everyone did what was right in his own eyes, chaos would ensue.

C. S. Lewis deals with this whole issue in his important book *The Abolition of Man*. The book begins as an analysis of how educational systems of the 20th century reduced all value judgments (“That is good”) to worthless sentiments (“I like that” or “That makes me happy”). Lewis takes that whole view to task, and then envisions what society will be like if this line of thinking takes hold:

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. The practical result of education in

the spirit of *The Green Book* must be the destruction of the society which accepts it. (end of ch 1, opening of ch 2, p 35, 39)

Moral relativism is a serious threat to the gospel, to Christian conviction, and to human society. So how should we answer when we encounter it in someone we know?

- Probe the mind
- Prick the conscience
- Pierce the heart

PROBE the MIND

Ask why your friend believes that morality is up for grabs. Chances are, you're going to hear an answer something like one of these:

- Different cultures have different moral standards. Who are we to judge?
- Moral absolutes make people judgmental, exclusive, and intolerant. Relativism promotes toleration, diversity, and equality.
- Morality is simply utilitarian (i.e, useful). Whatever works best is best, and that might change from place to place or time to time.

All three of these arguments are flawed. Let's examine each one in turn:

1. Cultural diversity proves that morality cannot be universal.

The mere fact that people (or cultures) disagree doesn't prove that there is no objective right and wrong. This is an example of what's called the "Is-Ought Fallacy" in logic or philosophy. It's a common logical error: "We've always done it that way." or "Everyone is doing it." The problem with this line of reasoning is this: the way things ARE cannot prove the way things OUGHT TO BE. You can't derive imperatives from indicatives.

Furthermore, some cultural differences only *appear* to be based on different values, but if you dig a little deeper you'll find that the values are the same. It's the beliefs or the practices that are different. For example, in India, people don't eat cows; Americans love eating cows. These are look like different moralities, but actually they are just difference practices. Underneath the practice is the same value: the sacredness of human life. Hindus believe that a cow may be a dead

relative, so they don't want to eat it. Americans would agree, of course, that it wouldn't be moral to eat a dead relative. The contrast here isn't a difference in moral values; it's a difference in beliefs and resultant practices. The underlying moral values are actually the same.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis responds to a similar accusation—how can you Christians claim to have found absolute truth when you used to burn witches a few hundred years ago? Lewis points out that the witch hunts of past centuries were based on different facts, not different moral values. For some reason, town leaders of that era believed that certain women had sold themselves to the devil, received supernatural evil powers, and were using those powers to harm society. We, on the other hand, simply don't believe such people exist—at least not so commonly. But if they were prevalent in our culture, we would all agree that they shouldn't be left to work their evil magic upon us.

"It may be a great advance in knowledge not to believe in witches; there is no moral advance in not executing them when you do not think they are there. You would not call a man humane for ceasing to set mousetraps if he did so because he believed there were no mice in the house." (*MC*, bk 1, ch 2, 15)

And finally, we might point out that cultures differ in some moral particulars, but their similarities often far outweigh their differences. In his Appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis quotes from a vast array of sources to show this common moral ground among different cultures. He categorizes his quotes into laws of kindness, duties to parents/elders /ancestors, duties to posterity, laws of justice, truthfulness, and mercy. He draws from sources in ancient Hindu, Greek, Jewish, Egyptian, Roman, Babylonian, Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Indian, Christian, Chinese, Australian Aboriginal, and Native American tradition.

Sure, some cultures have moral differences. But by and large, there's enough commonality to recognize that most ethical values are quite widely shared. Focusing only on the differences skews our perception and leads to the (incorrect) conclusion that there are *only* differences. What appears as proof of moral relativism is actually just a problem in our perspective: we've ignored crucial evidence. The same (wrong) conclusion could be drawn about virtually any other field of study, since there are many complicated issues about which physicists, doctors,

historians, and mathematicians don't agree. Should we then say there's no such thing as absolute scientific truth or absolute medical truth?

2. Relativism promotes tolerance. All claims to absolute truth are intolerant.

Two things you should immediately notice about this argument. First, it is a value statement, based on a moral assumption. It assumes that there is at least one universal value: tolerance. Second, the statement itself is an absolute; thus, it's self-defeating.

Be that as it may, there's another problem with this line of thought. Tolerance is virtuous only if there is such a thing as right and wrong. If there are no moral standards, then my opinion is as valid as yours. My beliefs about morality are simply my personal preferences, and why would you pat yourself on the back for tolerating me and my preferences? It's irrational for you to show how tolerant you are by putting up with me and my preference for vanilla ice cream, no matter how much you like chocolate. There's no ground for indignation about personal preferences! Real tolerance comes into play only when someone is right and someone else is wrong, when one view is bad and another is good.

3. Morality is simply useful – the utilitarian ethic

Sometimes you'll hear that morality is merely a social convention. It's based on whatever works best for the good of society. Morality is, in this view, basically a cultural convenience, much like which side of the road we drive on. Americans use the right, but Brits use the left. There's no such thing as the "morally right or wrong" side of the road. Which side is immaterial; the really important thing is that everybody knows the custom and goes along with it. So with morality – whatever works best IS best.

But, we might ask, how can you tell whether something is doing a good job unless you know its job in the first place? How, without an overall sense of purpose, can you even evaluate whether a thing is proving useful for that purpose? A watch might be great at telling time but bad at driving nails. Unless you know what it's for, you can't say whether it's

a good version or a bad one. Similarly, how can we tell what is the most useful use of our eyes, our hands, our sexual organs without a clear definition of purpose? We need a transcendent standard.

Two more quick concerns with this way of thinking about morality. Who gets to define "the common good" or "what is most useful"? Again, we lack a standard for right and wrong. And finally, who can predict what will be best for society in the long run? We need more information than just what appears most useful right here and now.

ILLUS: helicopter parenting (being overprotective) has proven to hamper self-confidence, stunt emotional development, and even limit job prospects. Who knew?

PRICK the CONSCIENCE

The Bible tells us that, no matter how much people might protest otherwise, everyone knows right and wrong exist:

Romans 2:14-15 NLT *Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. ¹⁵ They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right.*

It was interesting to me to learn in my study this week that many atheists (cf. Sam Harris) and most philosophers actually agree that moral absolutes do exist:

In my debates with atheist philosophers, however, I find that almost nobody denies it. It might surprise you to learn that surveys taken at universities reveal, perhaps contrary to impression, that professors are more apt to believe in objective moral values than students, and that philosophy professors are more apt to believe in objective moral values than professors in general. (William Lane Craig, *On Guard*, p 140)

You'll find this true in most conversations, if you'll probe beneath the intellectual arguments and get to the conscience. Ask: "Is there anything going on in the world right now that people should stop doing, no matter how much they think it's OK? Anything like that historically?" People intuitively know that sexual abuse, torture, and child abuse aren't just social taboos or impractical. They're moral atrocities!

Napalming whole villages, burning widows alive at their deceased husband's funeral, the Crusades, the Holocaust—no psychologically healthy person would defend these evils.

...which means, deep down inside, everyone *does* believe that there is some kind of moral standard people should abide by, no matter what they personally believe. It's not just that it would bother their own conscience to do that; it's that they truly do believe there is a standard of morality which exists apart from us and all people are obligated to obey it.

ILLUS: It's intriguing when you see this happen even in the most relativistic context. A few months ago I watched about a season's worth of the show *Friends*, the universally popular sitcom from the mid-nineties and early 2000s. Even if you've never seen an episode, you're probably well aware that *Friends* wasn't a show of great moral inspiration. It was quite thoroughly relativistic, which is what made it so interesting to me when the script would involuntarily stray into areas of morality and goodness. For example, "The One Where Chandler Crosses the Line." Chandler finds himself alone with his friend Joey's girlfriend, Kathy—a girl he's been attracted to for a while—they are mutually attracted to each other, and they kiss. But suddenly, he breaks away and says, "Oh, no, no, no, This is bad." And she agrees. "Here's what we do. We forget it happened. OK, we swallow our feelings, even if it means we're unhappy forever. Sound good?" "What? Can you really do that?" Karen replies. "I have to. He's my best friend. And you're seeing him." (Season 4, no 7) Why would anyone subject their own happiness to some presumptive higher cause? There's no explanation for this except that Chandler (and Kathy) both feel beholden to some innate sense of responsibility not to betray a friend. People know intuitively that some things are right and some things are wrong, and nothing they do or say otherwise will ever change that.

PIERCE the HEART

At the end of the day, why do people doubt moral absolutes? It's because they would prefer to live without them. They don't want to be obligated to keep them. They think they can satisfy their desires and keep their conscience quiet at the same time.

Lewis points out in *The Abolition of Man* that most "moral debunking" isn't really that at all. It's moral replacement. It's an effort to destroy certain values and replace them with a new ones:

Their skepticism about values is on the surface; it is for use on other people's values; about the values current in their own set they are not nearly skeptical enough. ...A great many of those who 'debunk' traditional or (as they would say) 'sentimental' values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process. (41)

Why do people do this? One reason and one reason alone. It's because they want what they want. They desire. They long to be satisfied.

ILLUS: *Vow: A Memoir of Marriage (and other affairs)*, where Wendy Plump diagnoses the internal workings of an affair. She essentially concludes: the heart wants what it wants. I cheated, not because my husband wasn't meeting my needs, etc., but because I wanted to.

So what do we do with this? Criticize? Judge? Condemn moral relativists? No. 1) We portray Christian morality as it really is—good, full, rewarding, perfectly suited to who we are and the world where we live. 2) We show and share Jesus. Jn 10:10, 4:13,14; Ps 34:8

"Jesus is the only Lord who, if you receive him, will fulfill you completely and forgive you eternally." (*Reason for God*, 179)

© Copyright 2013 by Joshua Waltz