

God's Word, Our Yardstick

by Greg L. Bahnsen, Th.M., Ph.D.

Day by day we make decisions on how to act, we form attitudes and cultivate emotions, we set goals for ourselves and try to attain them. We do these things individually, as well as in various groups: our family, friends, church, community, occupation, state. In all of these contexts the kind of people we are, the kind of goals we have, and the kind of rules we observe in decision-making are ethical matters. All human behavior and character is subject to appraisal according to moral values; every one of our attainments (whether they be aims that are fulfilled or character traits that are developed) and every one of our actions (whether they be mental, verbal, or bodily behavior) express an unspoken code of right and wrong. All of life is ethical.

But there are many moral values which are recommended to us. There are numerous implicit codes of right and wrong. We go through every day in the midst of a plurality of ethical viewpoints which are in constant competition with each other. Some people make pleasure their highest value, while others put a premium on health. There are those who say we should watch out for ourselves first of all, and yet others tell us that we should live to be of service to our neighbor. What we hear in advertisements often conflicts with the values endorsed in our church. Sometimes the decisions of our employer violates laws established by the state. Our friends do not always share the code of behavior fostered in our family. Often we disagree with the actions of the state. All of life is ethical, but making ethical decisions can be confusing and difficult. Every one of us needs a moral compass to guide us through the maze of moral issues and disagreements that confront us every moment of our lives.

To put it another way, making moral judgments requires a standard of ethics. Have you ever tried to draw a straight line without the aid of a standard to follow, like a ruler? As good as your line may have seemed initially, when you pieced a straight-edge up to it the line was obviously crooked. Or have you ever tried to give an exact measurement of something by simple eyeball inspection? As close as you may have come by guessing, the only way to be sure and accurate was to use a proper standard of measurement, like a yardstick. And if we are going to be able to determine what kind of persons, actions, or attitudes are morally good, then we will need a standard here as well, otherwise we will lead crooked lives and make inaccurate evaluations. What should our ethical standard be? What yardstick should we use in making decisions, cultivating attitudes, or setting goals for ourselves and the groups in which we move? How does one know and test what is right and wrong?

In ancient Greece and Rome the city or state was taken as the ultimate authority and yardstick in ethics. Caesar was lord over all when moral questions were raised. Over against the totalitarian, divinized state the early church proclaimed the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The "ruling authorities" (Rom. 13:1) were told that "all authority in heaven and earth" resided in the resurrected Messiah (Matt. 28:18). Accordingly the apostle John portrayed the political "beast" of Revelation 13 as requiring that his own name be written on men's foreheads and hands (w. 16-17), thereby symbolizing that the state's law had replaced the law of God, which was to

be written on the forehead and hand (cf. Deut. 6:8). That is why those who stand in opposition to the beast are described as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:1, 12). God's people insist that the state does not have ultimate ethical authority, for God's law is the supreme standard of right and wrong.

The medieval church, however, came to foster two yardsticks of ethics: a standard for religious ethics found in the revealed scripture, and a standard for natural ethics found in man's reason as it examined the world. Of course that left some ethical decisions or evaluations independent of the word of God, and those religious issues which remained under the umbrella of the Bible were ultimately decided by the Pope. Thus the medieval world was ripe for tyranny in both a secular state and despotic church. Over against this the Reformers challenged the traditions of men and reasserted the full authority of God's word, declaring "sola scripture" and "tote scriptura" (only Scripture and all of Scripture). The final standard of faith and practice, the yardstick for all of life (personal as well as social morality), was the Bible. That is why the Puritans strove to let God's word form their lifestyle and regulate their behavior in every sphere of human endeavor. A holy God required them to "be holy in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15), and the standard of holy living was found in God's holy law (Rom. 7:12). Accordingly the Puritans even took God's law as their yardstick for civil laws in the new land to which they eventually came, and we have enjoyed the fruits of their godly venture in this country for three centuries now. The attitude of the Reformers and Puritans is nicely summarized in Robert Paul's painting which hangs in the Supreme Court Building, Lausanne, Switzerland. It is entitled Justice Instructing the Judges and portrays Justice pointing her sword to a book labeled "The Law of God."

Nevertheless, with the coming of the alleged "Enlightenment," the yardstick of ethics progressively shifted from the law of God in the Bible to human laws fostered by independent reason and experience. A neutral or critical attitude toward the inspired Scripture undermined its recognized authority over all of life, and modern ethics has come to be characterized by an autonomous spirit — an attitude of "self-law." The yardstick of ethics would be found within man or his community. Butler located it in man's conscience, Kant in man's reason, and Hegel in the Absolute state. The one thing shared by all schools of modern ethics is an antipathy to taking moral direction from the Bible, for to do so is viewed as outdated ignorance, unreasonable prejudice, undemocratic and impractical. Being uncomfortable and irritated by the holy requirements of God's law for every aspect of human conduct, "modern" men reject this shackle upon their personal liberty and desires, and they ridicule its provisions for social justice. The predictable result in Western culture is the tension between an unrestrained, tyrannical state on the one hand and the liberated, unrestrained individual on the other. Statism and anarchy pull against each other. The immoral policies of the state are matched by the immoral lives of its citizens.

In earlier ages this kind of situation was redressed by the church as it served the function of preservative "salt" in the earth (Matt. 5:13). But today vast numbers of theologians have thrown away the biblical yardstick of ethics and substituted something else for it, and the outcome has been the loss of any respectable, vigorous, reforming ethic in the contemporary church. "Thus saith the Lord" has

been reduced to "it seems to me (or us)." Bonhoeffer said that "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without Him" (Letters and Papers from Prison). Not only does Frank Sinatra sing out modern men's testimony for Western culture, "The record shows I took the blows, and did it my way," but the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg delivers the modern church's response: "The proclamation of imperatives backed by divine authority is not very persuasive today" (Theology and the Kingdom of God). The Bible no longer directs all of life because its requirements are deemed stifling and are viewed in advance as unreasonable.

Men repudiate God's "interference" in their lives by His commandments. This attitude of lawlessness (I John 3:4) unites all men because of their sin (Rom. 3:23). Even theologians today pretend to be ethical authorities in their own right who know better than the Bible what is right and wrong. In Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy (cf. Ian Ramsey) Graeme de Graaff says, "There is no room in morality for commands, whether they are the father's, the schoolmaster's or priest's. There is still no room for them when they are God's "commands." The leading advocate of situation ethics in our day, Joseph Fletcher, tersely concludes that "Law ethics is still the enemy. "And these lawless attitudes continue to filter down to the local level. A "liberated" woman writes in The Reformed Journal (1975): "I thank God that as a reformed Christian I worship a God of grace and not a God of rules."

By contrast, the biblical attitude is expressed by the apostle John when he says "The love of God is this, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome (I John 5:3). Believers in Jesus Christ do not wish to be a law unto themselves, unfettered by external divine requirements. They welcome and love the biblical standard of right and wrong — no matter what it may stipulate for any aspect of life. God's holy law is not a burden to them, and they are not constantly searching for substitutes which will be more pleasing to the autonomous attitude of their age. They do not prefer self-law to God's law, for they recognize that it is impossible to draw straight lines and make accurate measurements in ethics without the infallible yardstick of God's word.

All of life is ethical we have said. And all ethical judgments require a dependable standard of right and wrong. Jesus said, having just declared that He will eternally reject all those who practice lawlessness "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock (Matt. 7:24-27). Will your life be founded upon the sure rock of God's word, or the ruinous sands of independent human opinion? Will your ethical decisions be crooked and inaccurate, following foolish and lawless standards, or will you wisely employ the yardstick of God's revealed word?

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