

# MORALITY, ETHICS AND THE LAW

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Morality, ethics and the law might seem like interchangeable words, but there are significant differences among the three, and it's important that we know the differences if we are to live full, responsible lives as thinking adults. For example, it's not our Christian responsibility to live an ethical life and it's not our Christian responsibility to live a lawful life. It's our job as Christians to know and do what is morally right, no matter the effect on the other two. Sometimes, to do what is morally right we have to depart from the common view of ethics, or the written law.

Here are Webster's definitions of the three:

**LAW**---A RULE OF CONDUCT OR ACTION PRESCRIBED OR FORMALLY RECOGNIZED AS BINDING OR ENFORCED BY A RULING AUTHORITY. EG NEW MEXICO AND US.

**ETHICS**---THE PRINCIPLES OF CONDUCT GOVERNING AN INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP. THIS IS THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE, OR COMMON VIEW. OVER THE BACKYARD FENCE.

**MORALITY**---CONFORMITY TO IDEALS OF RIGHT HUMAN CONDUCT. THE IDEAL HAS TO COME FROM SOMEWHERE.

Now the law of the land tends to change about every 10 to 20 years, depending upon the circumstances of our times, and who is in power and therefore making the law. A straightforward example of the changing of law is the highway speed limit. It used to be 70 or 75 miles and hour in the early 1970's but was reduced to 55 miles per hour nationally during the fuel crisis of 1973 in order to save gas. Once fuel became readily available and cheap again, we raised the speed limit back up to where it was before the crisis. The law changed to reflect the interests of our times. Save fuel when it's expensive and get there quicker when it's not. Another example is antitrust law and its enforcement. In the 1960s through early 1980's our justice department tended to break up monopolies, such the way we broke up the old Bell Telephone Company into AT&T and the baby Bells. In the late 80's and early 90's justice took a more lenient view and we saw a lot of acquisitions and mergers in America. Now, our justice department is back at it, trying to break up Microsoft.

Ethics, or the common belief of what is right, tends to change in 50 to 100 year time periods. This is why certain questions of our day take lots of time to work through to a general consensus for the nation to determine what's commonly seen as right and what's seen as wrong. An example might be made of our recent Presidential escapades. Who doubts that in earlier times the president would have lost his job over the behavior exhibited with Monica Lewinsky, or in telling the country that he did not have an affair with that woman, Miss Lewinsky, and ultimately admitting he lied to our country.

Today, for the large majority of our population and elected representatives, neither the behavior nor the lie rise to the level of “high crimes and misdemeanors”. Our country’s ethics have changed substantially in the last 10 years.

Morality never changes. What is right, or ideal human conduct, always remain so. Sometimes, in the heat of battle or in the opinion of our countrymen its extremely hard for us to see just what is right. And the reason it is hard to separate morality, ethics and the law is because we live in the context of our times.

Today, we live in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Because we do, we are likely to think differently and make different choices concerning right and wrong than if we lived at any other time, or any other place. This is because living in 21<sup>st</sup> century America put us in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture, and this influences our values and choices more than we can imagine. Let’s take a look at the effects of culture, and then look at why any of this makes a difference to you.

Culture can be defined as the sum of economic, government, arts, technological, knowledge and spiritual conditions existing in a certain environment---in our case, the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If we had been alive in the year 1776, at the founding of our country, the culture would have been quite different. From an economic standpoint, the family farm was the major engine of the economy, and this was supported by a very limited offering from the local country store. The citizens of the United States had lived most of their lives under the ruling of a man—the king of England, as compared with our current representative democracy form of government---or the rule of law. The arts were limited to in-person performances and the written word was just beginning to be widely dispersed with the fairly recent invention of the printing press. From a technological perspective wale oil was the fuel that was used. Compared with today the strongest element of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the spiritual dimension, as the most read book was the family bible, and attending your community church was standard practice, and expected, and your absence would have been noted. All decisions---personal as well as governmental---had spiritual implications.

The major value issue of the times was the separation of the colonies from Great Britain. The citizens of what is now America struggled mightily with the question of what was the right destiny for the colonies. There was a lot of debate on this matter, as we know from the writing of the leaders of that era. Was separation from England the right thing to do? Or would it mean the end of the Colonies forever? It was certainly illegal, by British standards and British law, and those in England thought the US separation was just plain wrong, or unethical. But was it the morally right thing to do? That’s what our forefathers struggled with. Today we might look back and say it was obvious that all people should live in a system of governance by self-determination. This just wasn’t so obvious at the time and it was quite a struggle. Where did they turn for their answers to the tough questions of the day?

A second major issue of the time was determining who would be able to vote in the new, US elections---only land owners, or everyman. Our Declaration of Independence declared everyone free, but not every freeman had a vote. And certainly not the women. Women didn't vote in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and they wouldn't vote for another 125 years. The law said women couldn't vote, and ethically our citizens believed they shouldn't---but morally, was that right? Where did the people of the 18<sup>th</sup> century go for answers---their culture?

Approximately one hundred years later, during the civil war era, the new technology of the steam engine was allowing for the development of mass production, which led to efficiencies in manufacturing and the development of a mass-produced goods economy. Family farming began to take less of a place in the economy. These advances initiated the long migration from the family farms into the cities. The introduction of the telegraph brought rapid communication across great distances, which allowed for urgent messages and news to travel fast, completely across the country in a matter of hours. From an arts and entertainment perspective traveling shows and burlesque came into vogue. Alexis de Tocqueville famously commented on the "can-do", optimistic attitude of America, in sharp contrast with what was felt in Europe in the last years of the monarchy form of government. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw good growth in the population of organization-sponsored traveling missionaries---both throughout the west to bring the good news to the American Indian, and on into foreign countries, such as China. In the U.S. church-going had begun to seriously decline and parents of families which lived in our cities began to wonder about the influences their culture was beginning to have on their children.

The issue of the day, of course, was slavery---was it no longer right for one man to own another---as had been the case for over 200 years, or maybe, had it never been right?. Southern law said you could own slaves, ethics in the south said you could---but morally was it right? Where did the people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century go for answers---their culture? If you were a Northerner your culture said one thing, and if your were brought up in the South, your culture provided a different point of view. The whole country struggled and the disagreement between North and South took us into a long, bloody war where American fought American over what was morally right in each own eyes. It took our country a long time to see that morally our ethics and law were in error.

Today we might look back and say it was obvious that slavery was always wrong and that all people should live free. This just wasn't so obvious at the time and many lives were lost in the civil war over this issue. Where did a thinking individual turn for his answers to the tough questions of the day? The ethics or law of his culture? That's what caused the conflict in the first place.

Today, we live in a lot different culture in America. Today in America we have an extremely strong economy as just about anyone with an economic dream can fulfill it with some inventiveness, some risk, a lot of hard work and a little luck. As an example, in 1999, during the "dot.com" company era, more than 60 millionaires were created in this country every day. Our economy is approximately 100 times larger than the

economy of Russia, though we have only 1/3 more people, and our economy is more than 30 times larger than the economy of India which has more than 4 times as many people than we have. Our technology is preeminent, as we have transformed ourselves into the information economy, with bits, bytes and broadband dominating so many areas of our lives. Our microwave ovens, palm pilots and DVD players offer us ease, information and entertainment at the touch of a button, unimagined by those earlier cultures. Our arts are delivered by 300 cable TV channels and the Internet, and we have more leisure time than ever before to enjoy them..

The issues of our day are just as weighty as freedom from an earthly king, or freedom from slavery.

Take abortion. This is one of the hottest issues of our day, and it's a continuing basis of struggle in our country. Our laws say a woman has the freedom to chose---its her body carrying the child and she is free to rid herself of a child faster than she can rid herself of unwanted pounds. Our supreme court says its legal, documented in the Roe vs. Wade case. And our country by-and-large says it's ethically OK. Popular politicians today run for election on a platform of maintaining a woman's right to chose, or abort her child at her will. But is abortion based on choice alone the morally right thing to do just because our culture says so? Where do we turn for these answers?

Let's Take Divorce, which was an extremely rare occurrence for those prior American cultures. Divorce law has now largely become "no fault" in this country, because it's the easiest and fastest thing to do. If you have fallen out of love or just plain don't get along anymore---get out. Our laws say it's OK---and, if you're really smart, you'll have a prenuptial agreement in place before the wedding. Our culture says it's Ok, and in fact, pretty much expected, as over 50% of marriages fail. But is it morally right to divorce just because our ethics, law and culture say it's OK? Where do we go for the answers?

Or take the gay and lesbian movement. What just a few years ago was broadly seen in this country as aberrant and abhorrent behavior is now protected in our non-discrimination labor law. Our military has a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, but throws out gay and lesbian soldiers once their sexual orientation becomes known. Its becoming more common for employee insurance policies of large US based companies to cover "partners" of any sex, and not just married spouses and children. The state of Vermont has passed the first law which provides for joint property protection for same-sex couples, in essence establishing the same joint property rights married couples have in the other 49 states. On the issue of gay and lesbian couples, our law says the behavior is OK and our culture is saying it's OK. But is it morally right? Where do we go for the answer?

Finally, take the separation of church and state. The first amendment to our constitution holds the words ""Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". That's all it says on the subject. It doesn't say there can be no prayer in public schools, or that you can't mention the name of God in public schools, and it doesn't outlaw towns from having nativity scenes at Christmas.

The Supreme Court, in the context of our times, driven by the ACLU, has interpreted and extrapolated the Constitution into prohibiting these expressions of faith.

Where do we go for our answers to these and the many other profound questions of our time? Do we go to our culture, which today means listening to our politicians and talk show hosts?

Our country is locked in battles over the issues of abortion, divorce and gay and lesbian rights, and separation of church and state just as mightily as it was over the issue of breaking from England and ending the practice of slavery. We just don't have the benefit of 100 years of hindsight to see these battles the way we see the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, or the way our great grandchildren will see how we handled our issues.

I raise these in order to clarify that there is a difference among morality, ethics and the law, and we all need to know the difference. It's our responsibility to know what's morally right and change the ethics of our times and change the law when they do not line up with what we know to be morally right.

God knew we were going to have to make these choices and He set forth a way for us to figure out what's right.

As we read from Psalm 119 "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways. You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees! Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands. I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws. I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me. How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees. With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

How much more obvious could God have made it. His answer for how we determine what is morally right when we live in the midst of our culture, is to come to His word and he will provide all the guidance we need.

Let's look at Psalm 19:7 "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden

faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

God says He will give us guidance. He will tell us what is morally right.

But we have to be active in searching Him out, and in protecting ourselves from the influences of our times.

In the New Testament we are given the guidance on how to get ready for handling the issue of our time and determining what is morally right. Paul wrote to the Colossians, Chapter 2, verse 8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Here we are told to be wary of the "principles of this world". Well, what do we think these principles of this world are? Aren't the principles of this world the basis of our current day culture, or what might be known as the "prevailing view? This is just what the Apostle Paul warns us against.

Furthermore, Paul charges us with taking control in our thinking and our capabilities to know the difference from right and wrong in Romans 12:2 when he says "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what is God's will is---his good, pleasing and perfect will."

He followed this in the letter to the Ephesians, 4:22 "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness".

What is righteousness and holiness if not learning and doing the morally right thing---just as God described it?

Now let's bring the Scriptures to bear on two of the issues of our day.

You want to know what God thinks about Divorce?

Go to these two Scriptures:

Matthew 19: 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator `made them male and female,' and said, `For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his

wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

1 Corinthians 7: 10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him.

So what is God saying about Divorce? Do you hear the words "No Fault"? God is against divorce except in cases of infidelity.

Let's take abortion.

Our culture and law basically says that until an Electro encephalogram can pick up brain waves, there is no human life in the womb, just something conveniently called a fetus, so since there is no "real" life, abortion is not murder. Our law, and our ethical position turns on the issue of when is a fetus becomes a human life.

Here's what God says about it. Jeremiah says, chapter 1 verse 4 "The word of the lord came to me saying "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations".

In Psalm 139: 13—16 we have God's further word "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mothers womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

If God knows us in the womb before our body is formed, He certainly knows us before our laws say we have life. It's as clear as can be that life precedes the convenient definition we use to establish OK abortion cutoff dates. It as clear as can be that abortion is morally wrong, no matter what our culture says.

If you do your homework and go to your Bible you can find God's positions on gay and lesbian behavior and on separation of church and state. You should do this so you will know what He says.

It's clear that God has given us lots of guidance in His word, if we will take the time to look, and if we will listen to what His word says. The only way to line up our law and our ethics with His morality is to follow His word.

So what do we do, knowing there is a big difference between morality, ethics and the law, and that the first one comes from God and the last two usually come from our culture?

Are we willing to search for His will and His word on the issues of our day by going to His word for the renewing of our mind?

Or will we take an easy road and conform to the patterns of this world by following the leading of our culture. Each one of us must choose, and we will each be accountable for our choice.

The Bible says in Proverbs 14:12 that "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end, it leads to death." God gave us a mind to think through these things, but He also gave us the ability to read so we can see His opinion on the matters.

Maybe you have made choices which have been morally wrong in the eyes of God. Confess it to Him and ask His forgiveness---he stands ready to forgive you and make your soul white as snow, by the forgiveness we have at the foot of the cross.

Maybe you have been weak in renewing your mind by failing to learn His Holy word, and turning to it for the wisdom we all need. Ask His forgiveness and help. He is ready to walk with us in all circumstances if we ask for His help.

Thank you and God Bless each one of you.