

Principles for Making Moral Decisions

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Introduction

When we speak of “morals,” “morality,” “mores,” and that which is “moral,” what do we mean? This family of English words is the transliteration of a Latin term, *moralis*, meaning “custom.” In modern usage, the adjective, *moral* (e.g., *moral behavior*, *moral values*, *moral issues*, *moral decision-making*), refers to right or wrong, good or evil character and behavior.

The title above implies the existence of at least the following:

1. “Moral” behavior (i.e., morality)
2. “Immoral” behavior (i.e., immorality)
3. A standard for discerning “moral” from “immoral” behavior
4. One’s freedom to choose to abide by a standard of “morals”
5. Principles by which one can make “moral” decisions

First Things First

Once one has resolved that he will live by certain standards (i.e., his “moral standards”), one must then choose the standard he will follow. This choice is the crucial one in determining one’s behavior—one’s “morality.”

I fully subscribe to the existence of an absolute moral standard and the Bible is that standard. The material in my manuscript acknowledges that proffered standard, the Bible, as the infallible and absolute standard of right and wrong, and the **only** inerrant and objective standard. Its impeccability lies in the fact that it is from God rather than from a mere man or men. It is God’s revelation of His will to mankind (1 Cor. 2:6–13). More particularly for those who have lived since the cross, the New Testament of Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son, is that standard of conduct in both morals and religion (Col. 2:14; 3:17; Heb. 1:1–2; 9:16–17). Only in a standard that did not and does not originate with men (i.e., it is from God) can (and does) an objective standard exist. All others reflect human bias, opinion, desire, emotion, and/or the injustices common to respect of persons. All of the “standards” men have advanced are, by contrast with God’s objective standard, subjective, affected by such imperfections and fallibilities.

Once one has chosen the New Testament as his moral compass, Scriptural principles exist (some stated explicitly, others implied) that will enable one to implement this decision on the practical and specific level. A discussion of these principles is the burden of our study.

The Temptation Factor

The aim of our arch-Adversary from the beginning has been to persuade us to abandon God's perfect standard of behavior to walk in his unprincipled paths. *Temptation* describes the tool by which Satan encourages our involvement in forbidden, albeit pleasurable fulfillments of fleshly desires. Thus James wrote: "but each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed" (Jam. 1:14). Temptation is inconceivable in the absence of pleasure and/or advantage of some sort. Where these elements (or expectation of them) are absent, temptation is nonexistent. When one yields to temptation, he makes a "moral" decision, albeit a harmful and sinful one.

The impulses with which God has equipped mankind (e.g., seeking the necessities of life, self-preservation, sexual fulfillment, "natural affection") are innately innocent, yea good and even necessary (God gives only good gifts [1:16-17]). The fulfillment of these desires outside of God's limits for them is the means through which Satan tempts men. I will illustrate: God limits sexual fulfillment to marriage (as He defines it), identifying this fulfillment outside of marriage as "fornication" or "adultery" (Mat. 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:2; Heb. 13:4; et al.) that, if not repented of, will keep one out of Heaven (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; et al.). Contrariwise, Satan tells us we are free to seek sexual fulfillment with any consenting person, including with those to whom one is not married, and that doing so is as acceptable as it is within marriage. Paul recognized this dangerous allurements of the devil when he wrote that each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband in order to avoid fornication (1 Cor. 7:1-2). He labeled the doctrine of "forbidding to marry" as a "doctrine of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1, 3).

A study of the principles for making moral decisions is therefore a study of the way to confront and conquer our day-by-day temptations to violate God's code of moral conduct.

Exploring Some Flawed Principles

Worldlings who choose the wrong standard by which to gauge their behavior generally do so because they choose the wrong principles upon which to decide the way they will behave. We will do well to consider some of these defective and destructive "rules."

1. **"Is it fun?"** or "Will it give me pleasure?" is all that matters to the vast majority of the human race when decision-time comes concerning moral behavior. While this basis of behavior has been universally popular from the beginning (Eve believed the forbidden fruit would bring her great pleasure [Gen. 3:6]). Epicurus, a fourth-century B.C. Greek philosopher, codified it and gave a name: Epicureanism. This philosophy is utterly materialistic (denies God and afterlife) and holds that ultimate good rests in seeking pleasure and avoiding pain in the

present. This approach to morals and life in general was apparently commonplace in first-century Corinth. Thus Paul argues that, if there is no resurrection of the dead (as some in Corinth were asserting), then “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:12, 32) (in other words, Epicurus got it right). This conduct code logically holds that nothing is “off-limits” as long as it will result in pleasure or avoidance of pain. One can readily see that it is at least a first cousin to Hedonism.

Perhaps the nearest thing to a modern incarnation of Epicureanism is Secular Humanism. Paul Kurtz, one of its principal leaders and advocates over the past few decades, wrote the following in 1980:

As secular humanists we believe in the central importance of the **value of human happiness here and now**. We are opposed to absolutist morality, yet we maintain that objective standards emerge, and ethical values and principles may be discovered, in the course of ethical deliberation (Kurtz, *emph. DM*).

For the first 175 years of its existence, our nation, perhaps more than any other (at least in modern times), resisted Epicureanism, due mainly to the general belief in God and the knowledge of and reverence for the Bible among its citizens. However, all of that began to change rapidly in the 1960s, symbolized by the anti-establishment and radical mop-headed hippies’ credo: *If it feels good, do it!* This malevolent movement did not just suddenly spring forth, however. Humanists in high places had been sowing the seeds of this poisonous cultural shift for decades.

Law-making judges and Humanist moguls in public education enacted policies and curricula that resulted in removal of Biblical influence from public schools, and Humanist theologians produced pulpiteers by the thousands who convinced their congregations that the faith of their fathers in the Bible was ill founded. Biblical principles had for generations held back the flood of indecency and immorality. With the breaking of that dam, we have been all but drowned in the flood of moral abandonment. Paul well described this dissolute basis of behavior: “whose end is perdition, whose god is the belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things” (Phi. 3:19). *Perdition* does not signal a pleasant end to such a life. The *is it fun?* principle will eventuate in a destiny that will be anything but “fun.”

2. “**Is it profitable?**” or “What’s in it for me?” is the guiding principle of behavior for many. Like Scrooge McDuck of cartoon fame, these folk have \$ signs for eyeballs. Honesty and integrity are foreign concepts to them. This dictum embraces more than mere money, however. Pride, prestige, popularity, and power are the frequent fellow travelers with unmitigated pursuit of plenty. Our continued existence as a nation of free people in a constitutional republic is seriously threatened by many forces, among them a host of elected officials and/or their political appointees who live by this rule. Many are willing to engage in almost any sort of malignant behavior without a second thought if they see a selfish advantage. Among these are the liquor merchants and the drug dealers who care not that their actions destroy the lives of multitudes. The pimp who rules his prostitutes and the high dollar “call girls” who sell their bodies to the rich and famous are interested only in the income. In this class are the shyster televangelists who deceive the gullible masses with their

fake “healings” and phony “tongues speaking” so they can live the lifestyle of kings. Paul well described all who live with wealth as their motive:

But they that are minded to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil... (1 Tim. 6:9–10a).

Again, *perdition* is the Holy Spirit’s description of the unhappy future of those who serve mammon rather than God.

3. **“Is it lawful?”** is a more honorable basis for making moral decisions than the foregoing ones (pleasure- and money-lovers are seldom restrained by pondering the legality of their conduct). As long as human laws do not contradict Divine law (Acts 5:29), we must obey human laws (Rom. 13:1–7). Our world would be a far better place if all men were law-abiding citizens. However, merely using human laws as our basis of moral decisions is seriously flawed because living within the law does not equal moral uprightness. It is almost universally legal to sell and consume alcoholic beverages. Prostitution is legal in many areas of the world and in a few places in our nation. Various forms of gambling are not only legal, but are vigorously promoted by state officials. Sodomy, once almost universally illegal in our nation, is now universally legal. “No-fault” divorce laws allow that which the Lord prohibits, except for fornication (Mat. 19:9). It is apparent from these few illustrations that this test has major defects. These defects all arise from one root: All human law systems are subjective, temporary, and mutable. They are subject to such things as changes in legislators, cultural influences, and public pressures.

Exploring Some Reliable Principles

Explicit statements of Scripture

When the Bible student begins considering principles to help him make moral decisions, several passages come to mind. Some of these passages are preventive in nature, which, if followed, will help us avoid many temptations (every temptation we can avoid means a moral decision we do not have to make). Others of these Biblical statements have to do with making a decision at the time of confrontation with temptation. Consider the following:

1. **“Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation”** (Mat. 26:41a). Jesus spoke these words in Gethsemane to the trio of sleepy apostles. While no one will ever be in that set of circumstances again, we may nevertheless extract the principle that, by joining awareness of Satan’s wiles with our earnest prayers, we may avoid at least some temptations. The model prayer of Jesus contains the analogous phrase, “And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (6:13).
2. **“Be not deceived: Evil companionships corrupt good morals”** (1 Cor. 15:33). One cannot reasonably excuse himself from succumbing to the temptation to drink liquor and engage in immorality if he runs with those who frequent bars and “gentlemen’s clubs.” One is a fool who seeks instead of avoiding settings in which he knows temptation abounds. Concerning lewd women, Solomon advised his son: “Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh

the door of her house," lest he should go "after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as one in fetters to the correction of the fool" (Pro. 5:8; 7:22). Since avoiding such places and people will spare one many temptations, it follows that choosing for one's closest companions and confidants those who are striving to serve the Lord faithfully will have the same result: "Righteous companions encourage and enhance good morals."

3. **"Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour"** (1 Pet. 5:8). A sober approach to life (life is more than a "party," after all), coupled with vigilance of the prevalence of Satan's determination to destroy us, will spare us many temptations.
4. **Concerning the devil, Peter went on to say, "whom withstand steadfast in your faith"** (v. 9a). Even when one takes every precaution, Satan will find ways to attack and assail us with his "fiery darts" (Eph. 6:16). When thus confronted, the general rule is to stand and fight. The classic passage on taking a bold stand is Paul's extensive "Christian soldier" analogy in Ephesians 6:10-17. Only when we put on (notice, please, the Holy Spirit does not put any part of it on for us) the "whole armor of God" may we be able to "stand against the wiles of the devil" and deflect his "fiery darts") (vv. 10-13, 16). We should not wonder that so many saints fall when Satan makes his pitch. They stand naked of the protective armor the Holy Spirit supplies through His Word, and their ignorance of Scripture leaves them with little more than a butter knife for a weapon, rather than the sharp, two-edged "sword of the Spirit" (v. 17; Heb. 4:12). James counsels: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jam. 4:7b).
5. Although the general rule is to stand and fight when Satan tempts us, in some circumstances, heavenly wisdom dictates flight rather than fight. Several passages so command. The Gentile saints in Corinth came from a background of and still lived in an atmosphere in which fornication and idolatry were practically the norm (1 Cor. 6:9-11). They were not to "hang around" even to fight when Satan tempted them to resume those wanton and forbidden behaviors. **Paul therefore ordered, "flee fornication" (v. 18), and "flee from idolatry"** (10:14). Joseph wisely did not dawdle and attempt to reason with Potiphar's wife when she tried to force him to her bed of iniquity, but "he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out" (Gen. 39:12). Failure to run from such temptations at the moment of their appearance might well be disastrous.

After discussing the destructiveness of the love of money, Paul urged Timothy, "But thou, O man of God, flee these things" (1 Tim. 6:11a). Later he warned the young preacher, "Flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22a). Again, in some circumstances and temptations, the correct (and safe) moral decision is to run for one's life.

6. Among the most effective preventive measures regarding temptation and moral decisions is **engagement in righteous and wholesome activity**. While Holy Writ does not contain the exact phrase, *An idle mind is the devil's workshop*, it is there in principle. In both of the passages above in which Paul exhorted Timothy to flee, he immediately urged him to "follow after" such things as righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness, and peace (1 Tim. 6:11b; 2 Tim. 2:22b). Bible expositors have long observed that "at the time when kings go out

to battle, ...David tarried in Jerusalem" (2 Sam. 11:1). Had he been where duty called (in the field with his troops), he would never have seen and sent for Bath-sheba, leading him to compound his sin by murdering Uriah. His idleness brought shame upon himself, his nation, and God.

In a brief parable, Jesus told of an unclean spirit that departed his host, but later returned to find his former place "empty, swept, and garnished." This evil spirit then found seven spirits more evil than himself, and they all moved in, making the man's state far worse than before (Mat. 12:43-45). Nature despises a vacuum, and ever seeks to fill that which is empty. It is thus in the spiritual realm, as well. No life will be devoid of both good and evil but will be filled by one or the other. **To be "always abounding in the work of the Lord"** (1 Cor. 15:58b) is a powerful preventive measure regarding temptation and the moral decisions we must inevitably make.

7. The psalmist knew something about the role of prevention in making moral decisions, as he wrote, **"Thy word have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against thee"** (Psa. 119:11). We understand the basis of the foregoing preventive measure from Paul's familiar and sweeping description of God's Word:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim. 3:16-17, KJV).

The Christian who spasmodically attends Bible class sessions and worship assemblies, seldom (if ever) reads his Bible at home, and never thinks of buying or reading any supplemental books or periodicals to help him increase his Scriptural understanding, has no excuse whatsoever for falling quickly "when Satan tempts him sore." In fact, his very negligence of these fundamental sin-deterrents demonstrates that he has already succumbed to the sins of laziness and neglect, if nothing more. Even those who constantly add to their store of Bible knowledge are at times hard put to withstand the archenemy. Bible ignoramus do not stand a chance.

"Common sense" principles implied by Scripture

God's Word implies some principles that are helpful in arriving at correct decisions regarding the rightness or wrongness of a given behavior. We now turn to these, which will be framed in the form of questions by which one may gauge his actions.

1. **"How will this affect me?"** Paul's exhortations to the Ephesian elders ("Take heed unto yourselves") and to Timothy ("Take heed unto yourself") (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 4:16) imply the appropriateness of this question. Our bodies constitute "a temple of the Holy Spirit," and we are to use them to glorify God (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are to offer to God our bodies as "a living sacrifice" that is holy and acceptable (Rom. 12:1). The two *take heed* passages mentioned above relate especially to self-examination and self-care regarding our spiritual health. Jesus identified the commandment that is "first of all":

Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength (Mark 12:29).

In this statement he indicated that the entire being of each one of us must be involved in expressing our love for and devotion to God.

It is therefore necessary for us to ask ourselves about any practice in doubt, "How will this affect me?" Will drinking alcohol or using tobacco strengthen my body to greater service? Will this or that practice weaken me spiritually? Will what I am about to do corrupt my mind? If I must answer concerning the practice under consideration that it will harm me, weaken me, tempt me, or render me an unfaithful servant of Jesus, then I dare not do it.

2. **"How will this affect others?"** I must not only consider the effect a given act will have upon me, but the way it may influence others. While not all people have the same amount of influence (i.e., leadership roles amplify it), even those least known cannot escape their impact on others. Paul wanted Timothy to be aware that others would follow the pattern of life they saw in him. He therefore charged the young evangelist: "Be thou an ensample to them that believe, in word, in manner of life, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). Influence can be both strong and long. Abel offered his authorized sacrifice at least 4,000 years before the Hebrews epistle was written, yet its inspired writer stated that by his offering Abel "yet speaketh" (Heb. 1:4). Jesus taught that harmful influence is fraught with awful consequences:

But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! (Mat. 18:6-7).

Paul emphasized this same truth even about a behavior that is innocent in itself, but the practice of which would lead a weak brother to sin by engaging in it and violating his conscience. He warned therefore "that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling" by so behaving (Rom. 14:13b). Let us not mistake the meaning of Jesus and Paul in these passages. The one who is led to "stumble" in this passage is not merely one who does not like, complains about, criticizes, or grumbles at my behavior, but one who sins because of my actions.

Even if one should be so hardened as not to care if imbibing liquor, frequenting bars, engaging in fornication, or forsaking the assemblies of the church brings God's wrath upon himself, he is unfeeling beyond belief if he cares not about the destructive influence he has on his own children, closest friends, or others near and dear to him. Christians (particularly females) who excuse their practice of parading in attire that covers less than brief underwear sometimes excuse their doing so by saying, "It doesn't bother me or violate my conscience." They thereby ignore the harmful effect it may have upon others (particularly males).

Paul concluded: "Wherefore, if meat causeth my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh for evermore, that I cause not my brother to stumble" (1 Cor. 8:13). If this is the worthy and safe test regarding an optional practice (i.e., eating flesh), how much more worthy it is in reference to harmful or even questionable matters.

3. **"Will it pass the publicity test?"** Would I want to hide these words or this act from public view? Why do most of the drinking, immorality, crime, and other such ungodly activities

take place during hours of darkness and in places that are not well lit? Jesus answered this question:

Men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, and cometh not to the light, lest his works should be reproved (John 3:19b-20).

Those who have nothing to hide and who are not ashamed of their behavior do not sneak around or seek the cover of darkness for their deeds. Jesus also made this point: "But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his works may be made manifest, that they have been wrought in God" (v. 21). The Lord's faithful people are to live so that they are the "light of the world" that others see, and because of which they glorify God (Mat. 5:14-15).

That a young person would not want his parents to learn what he has done, or is doing, is a danger signal. If one would feel compelled to lie about his behavior, he should not engage in it. Would you be embarrassed and ashamed if your elders or your preacher learned what you are doing or thinking of doing? Would you have to keep this behavior a secret from your husband, your wife, or your children? Even if one were able to keep his behavior a deep, dark secret from every other human being, God still sees and knows: "And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). If what I am planning to do will not pass the "publicity test," I dare not do it.

4. **"Will it pass the universal test?"** There are numerous things men can do that are universally commendable, wholesome, and beneficial. God desires that **all** men not only hear the Gospel, but also believe it and submit to baptism in order to be saved (Mark. 16:15-16). He would have **all** men to know the Truth and be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) and to "come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). The worldwide practice of religion that is "pure and undefiled" (Jam. 1:27) would greatly bless our planet. Paul lauded the universal benefits of the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit by saying, "against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23). All of the foregoing would bless our sin-laden world immeasurably, as would so many other general practices.

However, if one is doing or contemplating doing something about which he entertains the slightest doubt, the "universal test" will help him decide, if he is honest. What if every person on earth did what I am thinking of doing? Would it make the world better or worse, more righteous or more ungodly? Would I want my parents or my children to do this? What would I think of my elders if they did this? Would I still respect my preacher if he did this? Would I still respect the wives of my elders and preacher if they wore this? Would it increase or decrease respect for the congregation in the community if every member did this? Run down the list of drinking, smoking, dancing, fornication, foul speech, lying, viewing pornography, road rage, forsaking the assembly, and many other things. Then ask if the world would be a better place if everyone thus behaved. If it is not good for my parents or children, my elders, my preacher, the whole church, the whole city, state, nation, or the world, it is not good for me or for any of the Lord's people.

5. **"Will it pass the prayer test?"** Can you ask God's blessing on what you are thinking of doing? Can you ask Him to be with you in the place you are thinking about going? If you do

what you are thinking of doing, can you follow Paul's directive concerning prayer: "In **everything** by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phi. 4:6b, emph. DM)? To deliberately engage in an activity, knowing that you cannot beseech God to bless you in doing so, is an intentional and presumptuous affront to Him. Such behavior amounts to rebellion and does despite to the Creator. It represents the exaltation of one's own will above God's will, thus being a form of "will worship" (Col. 2:23) and causing one to "sin willfully" (Heb. 10:26). If one's present or contemplated practice will not pass the "prayer test," he will cease all interest in it immediately if he is sincere about being in Heaven at last.

Conclusion

Temptation is a reality for each one of us as long as we are in the earthly state of our lives. It will not end for all men until "the dragon, the old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan" is at last cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, and we are secured within the jasper walls of the golden city (Rev. 20:2, 10; 21:18). While temptation is unavoidable, yielding to it is not. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians in this regard must have encouraged them, as it should us:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

The principles, tests, and questions discussed above will enable us to find that providential "way of escape" and make the right decisions regarding our behavior if we will apply them.

Work Cited

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