

Practical Principles of Right Living—No. 1

Dub McClish

Introduction

When we speak of “morals,” “morality,” “mores,” and that which is “moral,” what do we mean? 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.

Everyone develops principles by which we will live. Once one has resolved that he will live by these principles (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 Bible is the infallible and absolute standard of right and wrong, and the **only** inerrant and objective standard. 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). All the “standards” men have advanced are, by contrast with God’s objective standard, subjective, affected by 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.

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, “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 [Jam. 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 to avoid fornication (1 Cor. 7:1-2).

This study of the practical principles of right living is therefore a study of the way to confront and conquer our day-by-day temptations to violate God's code of moral conduct. 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]). This philosophy is utterly materialistic (denies God and an afterlife) and holds that ultimate good rests in seeking pleasure and avoiding pain in the present. This code of conduct logically holds that nothing is "off-limits" as long as it will result in pleasure or avoidance of pain. Perhaps the nearest thing to a modern incarnation this philosophy is Secular Humanism. Paul Kurtz, one of its principal leaders and advocates, 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 this pleasure-seeking behavior, 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, when the hippies introduced the mantra, *If it feels good, do it!*

2. **"Is it profitable?"** or "What's in it for me?" is the guiding principle of behavior for many. 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, the drug dealers, and the pimps who rule their prostitutes and who is interested only in the income. Also 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).

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). However, merely using human laws as our basis of moral decisions is seriously flawed because living within the law does not equal moral uprightness. Consider things like prostitution (legal in some places) alcohol sales (legal almost everywhere), gambling (legal in some locations), sodomy (once illegal, now celebrated), “no-fault” divorce (legal and common now), and other areas that are legal but not morally upright. All human law systems are subjective, temporary, and mutable. They are subject to such things as changes in legislators, cultural influences, and public pressures.

There are, however, some reliable principles found in the Scriptures to guide our lives. Some of these passages are preventive in nature, which will help us avoid many temptations. Others 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. We may 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.” 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 coupled with watchful awareness 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. We should not wonder that so many saints fall when Satan makes his pitch. 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. For example, 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). Paul urged the young preacher, Timothy, “Flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22a). Again, in some circumstances and temptations, the prudent moral decision is to run for one’s life. Failure to run from such temptations immediately might well be disastrous.
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. Paul exhorted Timothy to flee, and 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). Nature despises a vacuum, and ever seeks to fill that which is empty. It is true in the spiritual realm, as well. No life will be devoid of both good and evil but it will be filled by one or the other.
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 ignoramuses do not stand a chance.

[Note: I wrote this article for, and it was broadcast June 18, 1980, *Light of Life* radio program which aired daily on KPAR Radio. This program was presented by Granbury Church of Christ, Granbury, TX.]

Attribution: From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.