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MONDAY MANNA
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MAKING ETHICAL CHOICES IN A GRAY WORLD By Stephen R. Graves

Some people see everything in black and white, right and wrong, good and evil. Others see an ocean of gray, with nothing ever firmly planted on one side or the other. Life might be easier if the Scriptures contained a clear answer for every possible ethical dilemma. But that is simply not the case. In fact, the Bible does not even give a definitive answer to every ethical question discussed within its pages. So, how is the conscientious follower of Jesus Christ supposed to make the right choices when traveling through those tricky gray areas of life?

Everyone is held to the same standard of ethics when it comes to biblical commands. For example, “Thou shalt not steal” does not apply just to the cashier at the local convenience store. It applies to everyone – rich or poor, young or old. Beyond the obvious biblical mandates, however, there lies a world of preference, option, and opinion in which what is right for one person may not be acceptable for another.

What is needed, then, is a filter to help in making ethical choices about issues that are not directly addressed by any specific Scripture passages. We can’t simply look to what the laws say, because sometimes the law states what is allowed, but not whether we should always do it. As former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said, “Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.”

What filter should we use? There are many resources, but I appreciate the truths embedded in the Scriptures that can be applied to various situations. My personal filter for navigating the daily ethical landscape comes from two New Testament passages, Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10:23-33.

Both concern whether followers of Christ should eat meat offered to idols. This is not a pressing concern in today’s marketplace, but principles and questions that guided the apostle Paul’s discussion on that issue also can be applied to a number of gray areas of today:

1. Is it permissible? (If there is a clear biblical command against it, then it is not permissible.)
2. Will it lead to peace and mutual improvement?
3. Is it beneficial, profitable, or constructive?
4. Does it have the good of others at heart?
5. Will it cause another believer to stumble?

由香港工商基督徒協會 (CBMC Hong Kong Ltd) 逢週一發放

地址: 香港上環禧利街 2 號東寧大廈 20 樓 2004 室 Tel: (852) 2805-1923

Email: enquiry@cbmc.org.hk Web: www.cbmc.org.hk

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6. Does it bring honor to God's name and reputation?

A “no” to any of these questions should mean a “no” to the decision. In that way, these questions serve as an anchor of sorts. The challenge, however, is not doing this just once, but over and over, building up our ethical muscle memory. Ethical behavior cannot be a last-minute decision. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do.”

Our ethical edge must stay sharp. Our zeal for the true, the good and the beautiful must remain strong.

British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright said it this way, “Christian ethics is not a matter of discovering what’s going on in the world and getting in tune with it. It isn’t a matter of doing things to earn God’s favor. It is not about trying to obey dusty rulebooks from long ago or far away. It is about practicing, in the present, the songs we shall sing in God’s new world.”

© 2022. Dr. Stephen R. Graves describes himself as an organizational strategist, pragmatic theologian, and social capitalist. He advises executives and business owners, as well as young entrepreneurs. He is author of numerous books and many articles, and a public speaker. www.stephengraves.com.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. What, in your opinion, is the state of ethical decision-making in the marketplace today? Do you believe many people are guided by what has been termed, “situational ethics”? If so, in what ways?
2. Where do you fit in terms of how people perceive ethical behavior – do you think most issues are black and white, either right or wrong, or do many of them fall in “those tricky gray areas of life”? Give some examples.
3. When confronting a difficult ethical dilemma, how do you go about resolving it? Do you consult with trusted friends and colleagues to get their perspectives? With what other resources might you consult?
4. How do you view the Bible as a source of wisdom in making ethical decisions? Do you believe it remains relevant and practical for the 21st century workplace, or do you regard its principles and teachings as outdated and irrelevant? Explain your answers.

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:
Psalm 1:1-3; Proverbs 11:1,3,14, 12:15, 15:22, 19:20, 20:10,18,23; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

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